ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

FRED STENSON

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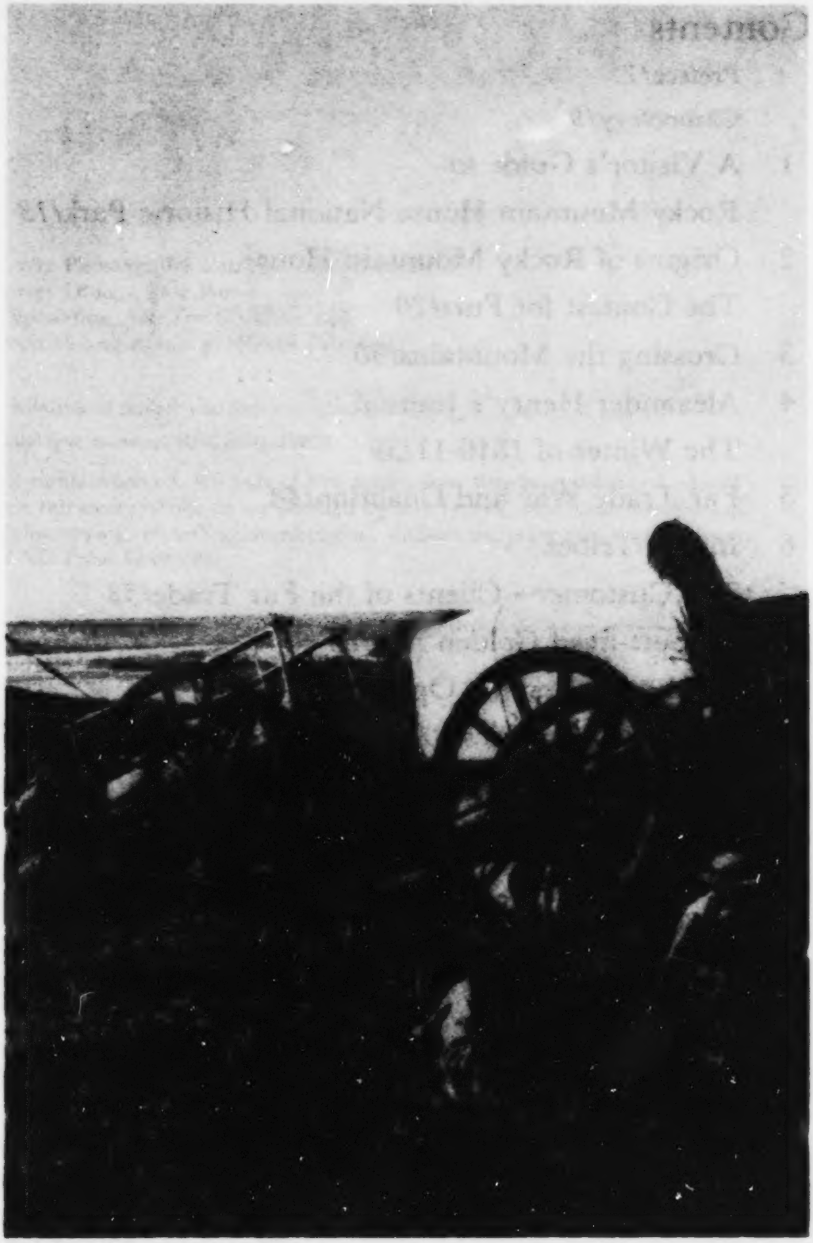


Red River Cart (PAC PA-9170).

PREFACE

> To protect for all time those places
> which are significant examples of Canada's
> natural and cultural heritage and also to
> encourage public understanding, appreciation
> and enjoyment of this heritage in ways which
> leave it unimpaired for future generations.
>
> Parks Canada Objective

Most of us learn history by reading — from journals and other first-hand accounts, or from scholarly and popular books. Or perhaps we learn visually, from old photographs and films, or new films made to recreate the past. The knowledge and appreciation gained in these ways is good, but something will always be missing until we actually stand in the places where history happened.

A major responsibility for safeguarding these important places and for preserving the remnants of the past they contain has been given to Parks Canada. Through its national historic parks and sites, the key people, places and events of Canada's past are celebrated; and even more importantly, they will be celebrated again and again by future generations.

In deciding what to protect, Parks Canada has tried to keep its focus large. In much the same way that the system of national parks aspires to contain an example of every landscape region in Canada, the system of national historic parks tries to cover the broadest, most significant historical landscape: everything from a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, to the Klondike Gold Rush at Dawson City, Yukon.

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park is dedicated to three themes: the fur trade, mountain exploration and the Indian tribes of the plains and mountains; themes which met and went through dramatic change on this small piece of ground in west central Alberta. This park is also the administrative centre for all national historic sites in Alberta.

Two other national historic parks in Western Canada, Fort St. James and Fort Langley, commemorate the Canadian fur trade. Fort St. James, near Prince George, was established by the Nor'wester explorer Simon Fraser in 1806. Later, under the Hudson's Bay Company, Fort St. James became the headquarters of the New Caledonia fur trade district. Fort Langley was built on the Fraser River, southeast of present day Vancouver, in 1827. It served the Hudson's Bay Company as a point of supply, first for the fur trade forts of inland British Columbia, and later for gold prospectors. Fort Rodd Hill, a third national historic park, in Victoria, dates from more recent times, 1895-96. It contains the remains of the most extensive artillery fortification on Canada's West Coast.

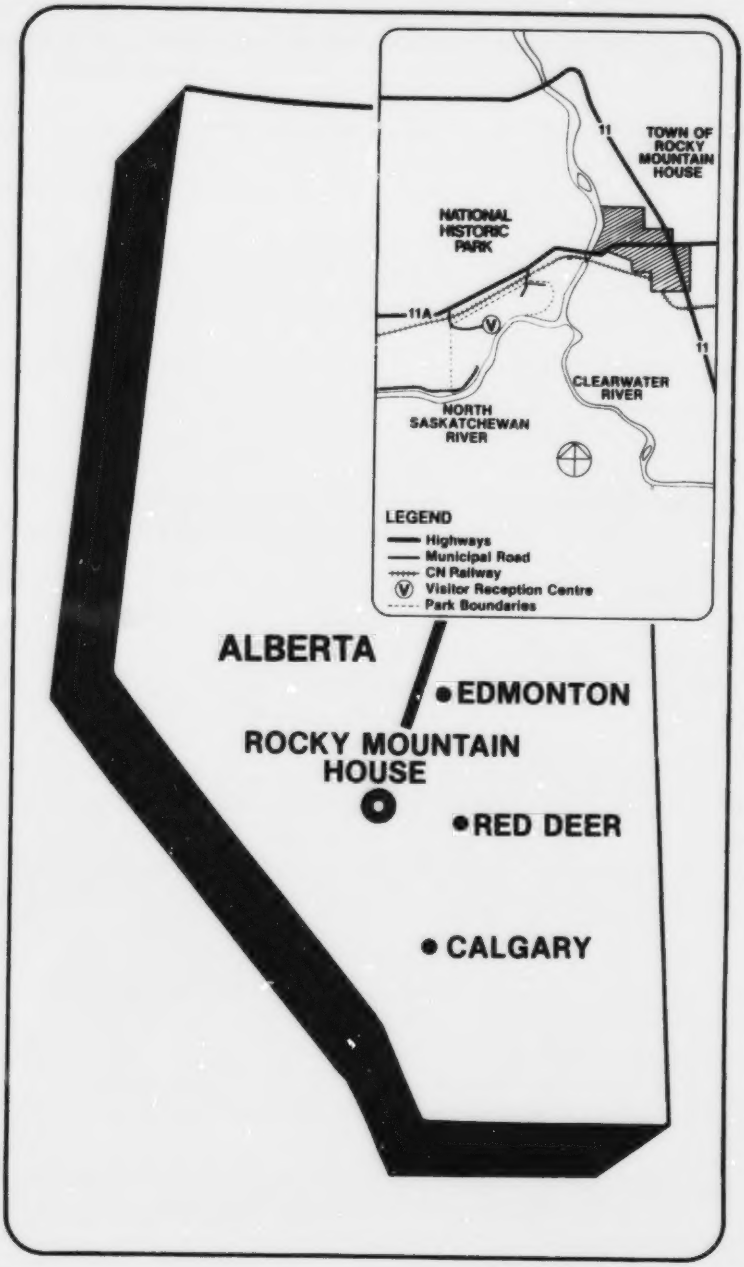
The guidebook you are about to read is one of a series produced by Parks Canada. Each book deals with one national park or national historic park so that the series, when complete, will be an encyclopedia of the system of parks in Canada. For the park visitor the books can be both pocket-sized guides to services and sites, then souvenirs, a part of the parks that can be taken home.

CHRONOLOGY

1799	Rocky Mountain House (North West Company) and Acton House (Hudson's Bay Company) are constructed near the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Clearwater rivers.
1802	Both forts are abandoned, having failed to draw the Kootenay Indian trade.
1805	Acton House and Rocky Mountain House reopen.
1807	David Thompson crosses the mountains from Rocky Mountain House to the Columbia River, building Kootenae House. Rocky Mountain House and Acton House are closed.
1810	The Piegan stop Thompson's fall brigade to the Columbia, hoping to prevent more weapons being traded to their enemies, the Kootenay and Flathead.
1810-11	David Thompson skirts the Peigan blockade by taking a midwinter expedition to the Columbia through the Athabasca Pass.
1810	Rocky Mountain House is reopened to placate Peigan. Acton House is reopened to safeguard Joseph Howse, exploring Flathead country for the Hudson's Bay Company.
1819	Rocky Mountain House and Acton House are reopened after a seven-year hiatus to reduce the conflict between the Blackfoot alliance and Cree-Assiniboine alliance at Fort Augustus and Edmonton House.
1821	The Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company merge under the Hudson's Bay Company banner. The united company occupies Acton House, renaming it Rocky Mountain House.
1825	Rocky Mountain House reopens as a wintering post after a two-year closure.

1831	The American Fur Company establishes Ft. Piegan on the Missouri, ending the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly over Peigan trade.
1832	Rocky Mountain House is closed in favour of Peagan Post on the Bow River, an attempt to recoup the Peigan trade from the Americans.
1833-34	Peagan Post fails. Rocky Mountain House reopens.
1835	A new Rocky Mountain House is built near the site of the previous post.
1841	Rev. Robert T. Rundle becomes the first missionary to reach Rocky Mountain House.
1847-48	Rocky Mountain House is left closed for the winter because of Blackfoot threats. Artist Paul Kane visits the abandoned fort.
1853	J. E. Harriott leaves Rocky Mountain House for Red River after twenty years in command.
1858-59	James Hector and John Palliser of the Palliser Expedition visit Rocky Mountain House.
1861	Starvation forces the abandonment of Rocky Mountain House. While the fort is empty, the Blackfoot burn it down.
1864	Rocky Mountain House is reestablished as a year-round post. A temporary structure is built and occupied while a larger fort is built.
1868	The permanent fort is completed and occupied.
1869	The Hudson's Bay Company gives up control of Rupert's Land. American whiskey traders cross the 49th Parallel and draw trade away from Rocky Mountain House.
1870	Captain W. F. Butler visits Rocky Mountain House, as part of his commission into lawlessness in the Canadian West.

1874	The North-West Mounted Police come West, driving the whiskey traders back across the U.S. border. The Hudson's Bay Company establishes a trading camp on the plains.
1875	Rocky Mountain House closes.
1912	The Canadian Northern railway reaches the village of Rocky Mountain House.
1931	A plaque commemorating the fur trade is unveiled at the ruins of the last Rocky Mountain House.
1979	Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park officially opens.
1980	Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park is gazetted.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11
NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK
11A
11
CLEARWATER RIVER
NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER
LEGEND
Highways
Municipal Road
CN Railway
Ⓥ Visitor Reception Centre
Park Boundaries
ALBERTA
EDMONTON
ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE
RED DEER
CALGARY

CHAPTER ONE

A Visitor's Guide to Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park

The Fading Trace

(Glenbow Archives).

The traces of the fur trade at Rocky Mountain House came close to vanishing. To realize how close, we might look at the site for a moment through the eyes of a chance visitor at the turn of the century. No one had settled here in 1900, so it is doubtful our visitor would have been a homesteader or squatter. More likely, he was a prospector, panning his way up the North Saskatchewan River in search of gold.

The site would have caught the prospector's eye for a couple of reasons. First, the gap in the trees above the river bank was unusual. Few clearings existed this far upstream and none this size. Also, he would have been able to see the tops of two or more chimneys above the rocky river bank. That would have been enough to coax him up for a closer look.

After walking round the chimneys for a while, the visitor would probably have deduced the connection between the large meadow and the crumbling fireplaces; that the terrace had been man-cleared to feed the winter fires. Then, as he kicked around in the grass and found the rotting stubs of an outer wall buried in the ground, he would have come to another conclusion: that the place had been built with defence in mind — some variety of fort. If our prospector knew anything about the country he was exploring for gold, the rest should have been simple. The only forts that ever existed in this part of the West were fur trade forts, relics of the era which preceded his own. The place he was standing at had to be the remains of one such fort.

In the following years, the traces of the last Rocky Mountain House continued to fade. The powerful chinook winds tore at the chimneys. The brush and poplar encroached on the meadow. The stumps of the palisades rotted deeper into the ground and were grown over with grass. Then the site became a homestead and bits of plank and iron nails were turned up by the plow.

Rocky Mountain House was disappearing fast and might have vanished. Earlier fur trade forts along these rivers had been lost, their names remaining in the written records but with no one quite certain any longer where they'd been. What prevented this at Rocky Mountain House was a feeling the local people had for their past. Most of the settlers who came to live in and around the modern town of Rocky Mountain House were strangers to the fur trade, but they did not want to lose touch with their region's past. They asked the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to protect the ruins of their old fort and, through a series of steps, this led to Rocky Mountain House's becoming Alberta's first national historic park in 1980.

Locating Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park

In the days when all travel was by foot, canoe, horse or dogteam cariole, Rocky Mountain House was described as being 23 minutes walk above the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers. It was 211 miles by river upstream from Edmonton House (180 miles by horse overland). It was 50 miles, or a two-day ride, from the Rocky Mountains.

Directions like these wouldn't help the average park visitor today. We need to know that the 228 hectare park is near the modern town of Rocky Mountain House which is 80 kilometres west of Red Deer, Alberta; and that Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House are connected by Highway 11. We need to know that the park entrance road is another 7.5 kilometres west of the town of Rocky Mountain House on Highway 11A.

Rocky Mountain House: The National Historic Park Today

To stand on the grassy banks above the North Saskatchewan listening to the churn of the rapids at the park's upper end is to share for a moment in the experiences of all those who lived here over a century ago. These people were keenly aware of the river because most of what was important in their lives travelled by it: the furs and families, the trade goods, news and gossip.

At Rocky Mountain House the past reaches out powerfully. In your mind's eye, voyageurs again ply the currents of the North Saskatchewan and echoes again fill the air as Indian bands fire salvos to announce their arrival to trade.

When Parks Canada inherited the role of protector of the historic site at Rocky Mountain House, it did not set out to rebuild the past. Instead, it worked to preserve the traces. The two prominent chimneys were partially restored to save them from further decay but, in general, the site was left very much as a chance visitor would have found it in 1900. Archaeology has located not one but four fort sites and has added greatly to their pieced-together history from the first fort's opening in 1799 to the final fort's closure in 1875.

A visitor centre, audioguides, interpretive signs and demonstrations at the park are there to tell the story and help visitors experience it through their imagination and through all their senses.

The Four Forts/A Quick Overview

Rocky Mountain House (1799-1821)

"The Pedlars' Home"

The first Rocky Mountain House, built in 1799 by the North West Company was at the southwestern edge of a fur empire stretching all the way from Montreal. The North West Company was the aggressor in the fur trade. It had to be, because its competition, the Hudson's Bay Company of England, was financially more stable and had the exclusive right to trade and ship furs from Hudson Bay. This relatively close access to the Atlantic Ocean gave the Bay company an advantage that the North West Company, or Nor'westers, had to overcome.

Using sound business tactics supplemented by bare-knuckle tactics, the North West Company extended its fur empire at the expense of the Hudson's Bay Company. By 1799, the North West Company was the leading company in the Northwest fur trade.

In 1799, the Nor'westers led the way up the North Saskatchewan River to within sight of the Rocky Mountains, building Rocky Mountain House in a clearing on the north bank. The original purpose was to establish trade with the Kootenay Indians who lived on the other side of the Rocky Mountains. The Kootenays couldn't trade at the forts farther east because the way was blocked by their enemies, the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot tribes also prevented the Kootenay from trading at Rocky Mountain House with the result that the post became a base for Nor'wester exploration and for trade with Indians closer at hand. Even with these other functions, Rocky Mountain House had to be abandoned several times between 1799 and 1821.

Surveyor-explorer, David Thompson lived in Rocky Mountain House for several years and, from this fort in 1807, launched his historic expedition across the Rocky Mountains. The fort was also the scene of many tense moments, any one of which could have sparked a war. The Nor'westers had angered the Blackfoot by trading with their enemies; and, as Rocky Mountain House was the closest Nor'wester fort to the Blackfoot hunting lands, it stood a good chance of being the target of any Blackfoot retaliation. The post was heavily fortified with palisades and loophole bastions, but the traders still lived in fear. They were a handful of white men deep within the territory of warrior tribes. Help was a long way away.

Acton House (1799-1835)

"Matching the Nor'westers Stride for Stride"

When the North West Company moved up the North Saskatchewan in 1799 to build Rocky Mountain House, it was followed by Hudson's Bay Company men intent on building Acton House next door. This was the commercial philosophy of the day: if one company made a move, the other tried to match it so as not to lose a portion of the trade.

Nevertheless, the Hudson's Bay Company had fallen well behind the Nor'westers by 1799 and, from the first, the men of Acton House were unable to attract as many furs as the Nor'westers at Rocky Mountain House. The worst part was that the Hudson's Bay Company had once held a large advantage over its competitors in the fur trade. For a hundred years, the Bay company had sat in forts on Hudson Bay waiting for the Indians to come, a policy one critic called the company's "sleep by the frozen sea." This passive way of doing business was successful until the French, and later the Nor'westers, opened forts inland, intercepting the Indian furs before they got as far as Hudson Bay.

In 1774, the Hudson's Bay Company was finally driven to move inland. It was unable to recoup much of the lost trade, however. Its competitors from Montreal, some of whom formed the first North West Company in 1776, were, by this time, experienced inland traders and they were given many incentives to increase their fur harvest and broaden company territory. The Nor'westers also had the Bay company beaten in canoe building and travelling expertise.

The very future of the Hudson's Bay Company seemed in doubt; but around 1810, under new leadership, the company rallied. The more the Bay company contested the fur trade, the more relations between the companies deteriorated until finally, they were practically at war. In 1821, worn down by the struggle, the two companies chose the lesser evil of amalgamation, under the Hudson's Bay Company banner.

This meant that there was no longer a need for two forts at the Rocky Mountain House — Acton House location. One of the forts was abandoned; but which one? Historians believe that Acton House, being the better fort, was kept on, but was given the name Rocky Mountain House.

This version of Rocky Mountain House was itself abandoned in 1823, then reopened in 1825 when the Peigan Indians promised to bring their furs there. The next few years were the most prosperous in the fort's history. The Peigan brought their trade as did many of their Blackfoot alliance partners (the Blackfoot, Blood and Sarcee). The Gros Ventre also traded at Rocky Mountain House in these years. The age of prosperity ended when American fur traders opened forts along the Missouri River, close to the Blackfoot alliance hunting lands, thus drawing the trade away from Rocky Mountain House.

Rocky Mountain House (1835-61)

"Losing the Trade But Keeping the Peace"

In a sense, the history of the 1835 version of Rocky Mountain House began three years earlier on the Bow River. There, in the fall of 1832, the Hudson's Bay Company opened Peagan Post in an attempt to win the Peigan trade back from the Americans. The experiment was tried two years in succession and failed both times. Both winters, the post had to be abandoned in favour of Rocky Mountain House. When the Hudson's Bay Company gave up on Peagan Post for the last time in 1834, it meant the reopening of Rocky Mountain House on a permanent basis.

The old fort was in such a ruinous state that a new fort had to be built to replace it in 1835. Throughout the middle years of the century, Rocky

Mountain House brought in some furs and quite a lot of buffalo meat that was made into pemmican for the meat-poor forts and fur brigades. Rocky Mountain House also built York boats for the transportation of the winter's fur harvest.

In the 1850s, conditions at Rocky Mountain House steadily worsened. Again, the fort was in dilapidated condition, and the men who sheltered behind its walls were faced with a Blackfoot alliance that was increasingly hostile. The Blackfoot wanted Rocky Mountain House closed in favour of a fort much farther south, but the Hudson's Bay Company refused because of the danger involved and because of the high cost of transportation to and from such a location. The Blackfoot protested by trading with the Americans and, deprived of Blackfoot buffalo meat, the people at Rocky Mountain House sometimes starved. During the winter of 1860-61, the traders ran so short of food they had to flee for their lives to Edmonton House. In the fall of 1861, a party of Blackfoot arrived at Rocky Mountain House and, finding it abandoned, they burned it to the ground.

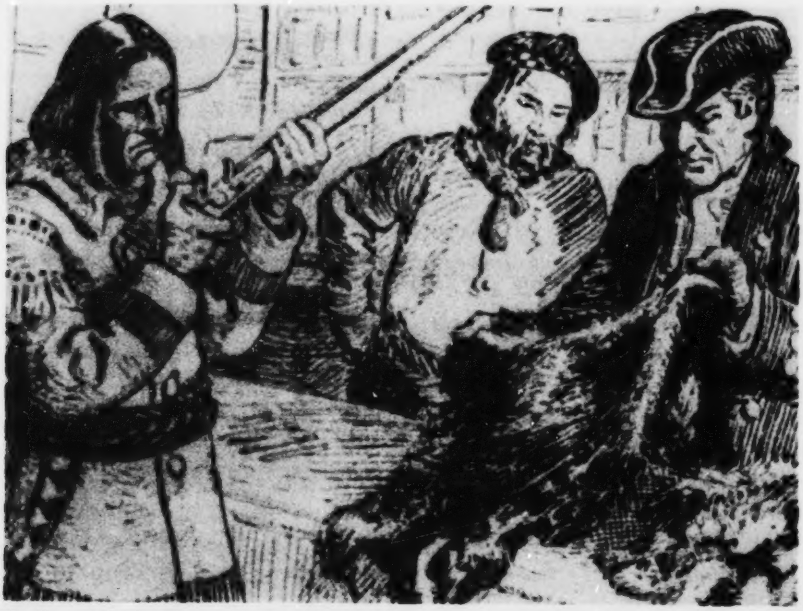
Rocky Mountain House (1865-75)
"The Last Post"

Given the problems that led up to the burning of Rocky Mountain House by the Blackfoot in 1861, it seems that the Hudson's Bay Company would have been wise to close the book on Rocky Mountain House once and for all. But it didn't. In 1864, a troop of workmen was sent to the old site to build again. They constructed a temporary fort where the company men lived and traded while a larger fort was built. This permanent post, which the company began building in 1865, was occupied in 1868. It sported the two large chimneys seen in the park today.

The Hudson's Bay Company made this move because of a change south of the border. Gold fever had struck the Montana area and the fur traders there were finding that a greater profit could be turned by selling trade goods to prospectors than could be realized by trading goods for fur. Seeing this, the Hudson's Bay Company prepared itself for a new age of prosperity. Rocky Mountain House was rebuilt on a grander scale in anticipation of the Blackfoot alliance's return. But the expected profits did not materialize.

The glory days of the fur trade were simply coming to an end. In the late 1830s, silk hats had replaced the felt hats made from beaver as the fashion in Europe. On the prairies, whiskey traders were pouring in to compete with the Bay company which had given up liquor as an item of trade. These and other factors made for a struggling enterprise at Rocky Mountain House. The fort built York boats, conducted a scanty trade and battled hunger in most seasons.

In 1874, the North-West Mounted Police arrived to clean up the lawlessness on the western plains. The whiskey traders were pushed out of Canada and southern Alberta became safe enough that the Hudson's Bay Company dared open a post there. This rendered Rocky Mountain House redundant. In 1875, the old Mountain Fort was abandoned, this time for good. Its intermittent life of seventy-six years had come to an end.



Trading at Rocky Mountain House (Parks Canada).

CHAPTER TWO

Origins of Rocky Mountain House The Contest For Furs

> Friend, once 'twas fame that led thee forth
> To brave the Tropick Heat, the Frozen North,
> Late it was Gold, then Beauty was the Spur
> But now our Gallants venture but for Fur.
>
> John Dryden, 17th Century

The French and the English

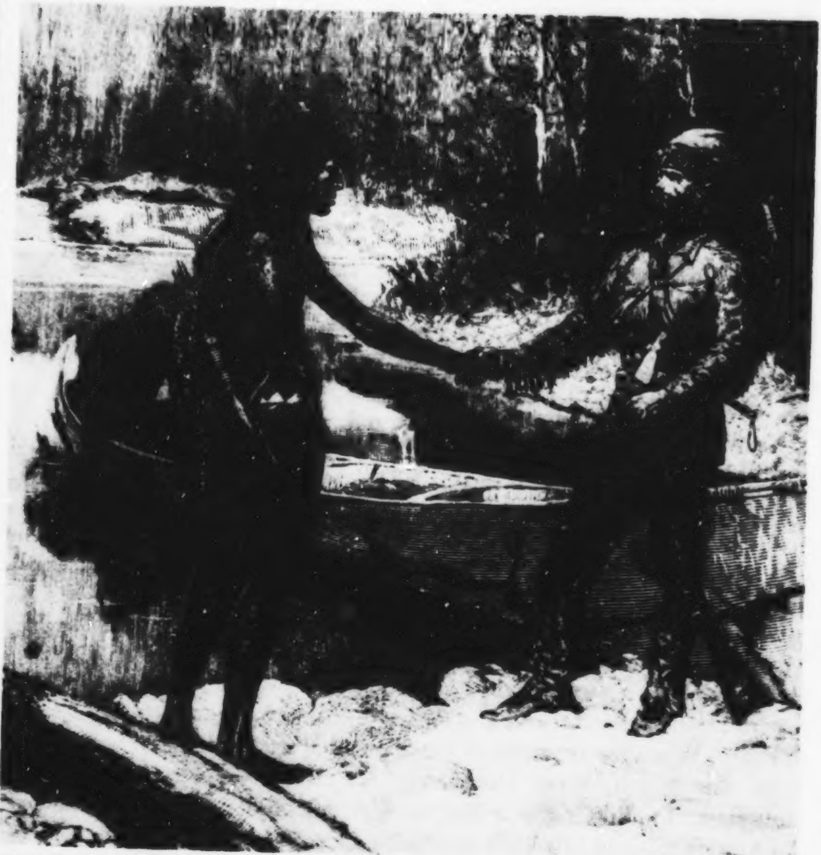
In the spring of the year at Rocky Mountain House, when the fur-laden canoes were unleashed to the North Saskatchewan current and the steersman stuck in his paddle to make the first turn east, they were commencing a journey one or two thousand miles long, depending on the destination. The two forts built on this river bend in 1799 were the southwestern extent of two enormous fur trade systems, each a series of forts connected by water and portage, leading roughly east. But one of those systems bent north along the watershed to Hudson Bay, while the other followed a more difficult and southerly course to faraway Montreal.

The Montreal fur trade originated in New France. The early settlers there made treks inland to trade with the Indians, earning themselves the title "coureurs de bois" (wood-runners). They could also have been called "fore-runners" because it became the French tradition to do as they had done: to go where the Indians lived, to learn their languages and customs and to bring their bounty of furs back to Montreal for shipment to Europe.

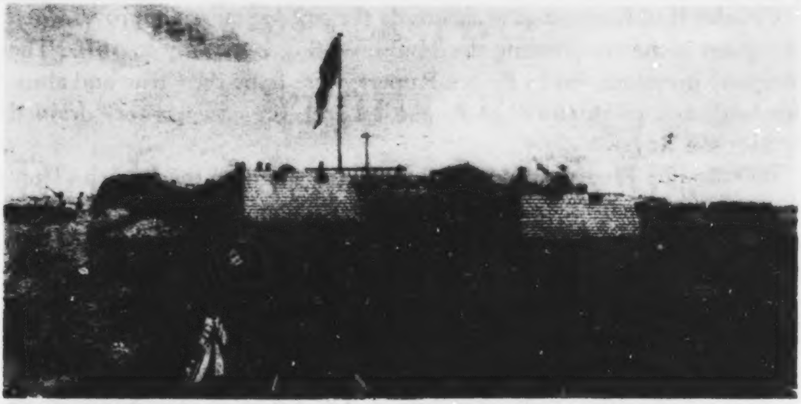
Both the French and the English were hoping to find a route around or through North America to Cathay and the riches of the Orient. The English sea captains of the 17th century carried their search north and west and found themselves in Hudson Bay. The rocky coastline frustrated them, but eventually they were awakened to its advantages as a port for the fur trade. All the English had to do was build forts and trade with the Indians as they came down the rivers.

Charles II of England gave this trade the royal stamp of approval when he signed a charter creating the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. The company investors, led by Prince Rupert, were to be the "true and absolute lords and proprietors" of Rupert's Land, the vast territory drained by Hudson Bay.

Initially, the English traders had the upper hand on the French. They had the Bay and there they sat. The French meanwhile struggled overland and upriver. The French struggled so well, however, that by the middle of the 18th century, they had penetrated to the Saskatchewan River system. Their chain of forts was well along its way to Rocky Mountain House before the English chain had sprouted a single link.



The French Tradition: to travel to the Indian villages and to trade with them there according to their customs (Glenbow Institute).



The English Tradition: to wait in forts on Hudson Bay for the Indians to come down the rivers to trade. Fort Prince of Wales, 1774 (Glenbow Institute).

The Pedlars Budge the Bay Company

In 1760, the North American fur trade underwent a sudden change. Wolfe defeated Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham and, a year later, Montreal, headquarters of the French fur trade, fell to the British as well.

If the Hudson's Bay Company saw the defeat of the French as the end to its problems, it was mistaken. The last shot had barely been fired when Scotsmen and Englishmen grabbed control of the Montreal trade. They ran the show just as the French had and, if anything, were more bitter opponents of the company on the Bay.

The Hudson's Bay Company called its new competition "the pedlars," but these pedlars proved to be so efficient at the trade that the Bay company finally had to break with tradition and move inland to compete with them. In 1774, the Hudson's Bay Company built Cumberland House, its first step in the march that would bring it to Rocky Mountain House a quarter of a century later.

The move was not an entire success. Following the French lead, the Montreal pedlars had become aggressive and expert inland traders. Despite its long experience the Hudson's Bay Company was relatively inexperienced at inland travel and at dealing with the Indian tribes on their territory. When the strongest of the opposition traders banded together to form the North West Company, the Bay company's difficulties multiplied. Trading for these Nor'westers, Alexander Mackenzie reached the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and the Pacific Ocean in 1793. In the shadow of this exploration and vigour, the Hudson's Bay Company scraped along, trying to retain its small share of the trade.

Rocky Mountain House and Acton House

In the late 1700s, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were close enemies. When one of them opened a new fort along the Saskatchewan, the other usually opened a post right next door. In 1795, when the Nor'westers opened Fort Augustus, and the Hudson's Bay Company countered with Edmonton House, the two shared a common stockade.

It was the Nor'westers who made the decision to move upriver from Fort Augustus and build a fort called Rocky Mountain House. They did so to get closer to the Kootenay Indians who lived across the mountains. In 1795, Duncan McGillivray had noticed that the Kootenays wanted to come in to trade but were being prevented from doing so by their enemies the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot wanted to ''exclude them from any share of our commodities, which would put their enemies in a condition to defend themselves.'' In other words, the Blackfoot had guns, the Kootenay didn't, and the Blackfoot meant to keep it that way.

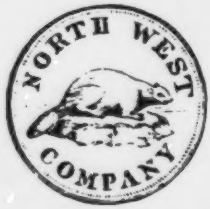
In the summer of 1799, the Nor'westers found their site on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan just above its confluence with the Clearwater River, and just below Pangman's Pine. Peter Pangman, a North West Company partner, had left an inscription on this pine tree a decade before to mark the point where he turned back after a tour of exploration.

A bigger expedition set off from Fort Augustus in mid-September of 1799. A force of Nor'westers led by John McDonald of Garth started upriver, and with it, a brigade of Hudson's Bay Company men led by James Bird. The Hudson's Bay Company had caught wind of the Nor'wester project and was on its way to provide Rocky Mountain House with a neighbour and competitor called Acton House. This name honoured Mr. Bird, who was a native of Acton in the county of Middlesex in England.

Part of this fall expedition went by river and part overland. The riders were joined by a troop of Peigan Indians who followed them to the fort sites and waited there until the boats carrying the trade goods arrived. So it was that the Peigan Indians of the Blackfoot alliance, and not the Kootenays, were the first to trade their furs at Rocky Mountain House — an omen of things to come.

The Beaver Trade

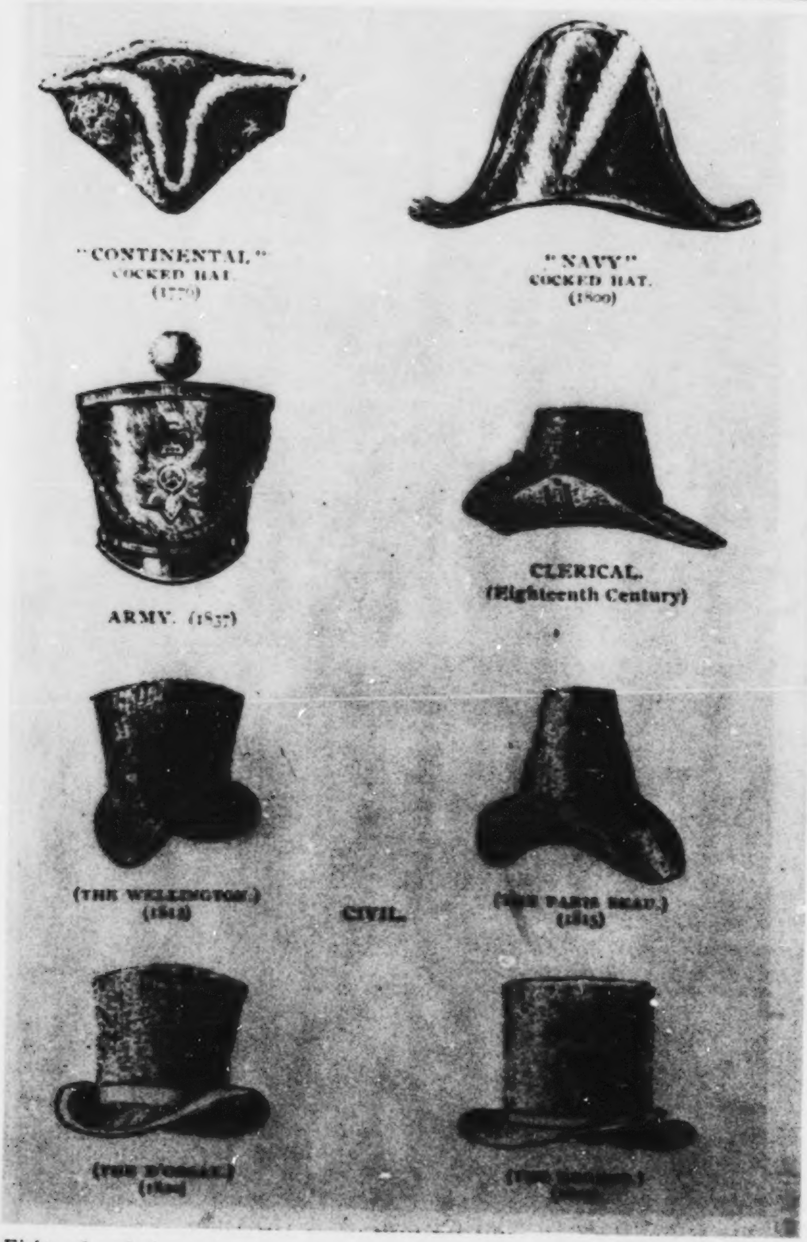
In the mid-17th century, England's most famous diarist, Samuel Pepys, wrote of his "new beaver hat which altogether" was "very noble" with his "black silk canions." Pepys was not alone in sporting a new beaver hat; everyone was. And the pelts from which the hats were made came from North America.



North West Co. Stamp (Castorologica, *Martins, 1892*).

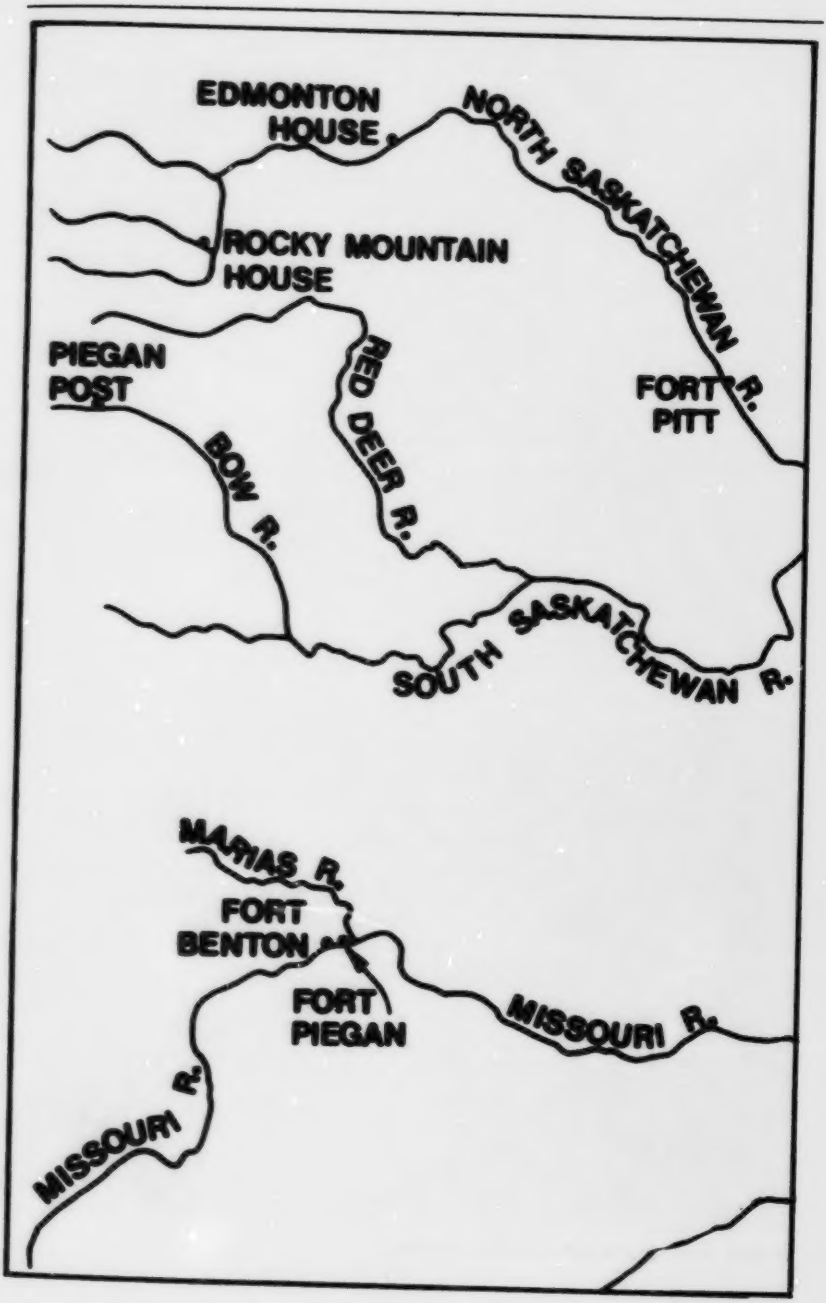
What made the beaver pelt such a widely demanded commodity was the discovery that it was particularly good for "felting," or felt-making. Unlike the furrier, the felter used only the hair of the animal (rather than the full pelt). From it, he created a material which was strong, flexible and long-lasting. The heavy undercoat of the beaver was ideal for this; and, if you removed the undercoat without harming the outer hair, a decent fur remained for sale to the furrier. If the pelt had been worn and greased by the Indians prior to trade, and the outer hairs worn off, the felter simply shaved the skin and sold the pliable leather that remained. Unfortunately for the felter, long term exposure to the chemicals used in the felting process caused insanity, hence the phrase "mad as a hatter."

The beaver trade held up well for almost two centuries. It wasn't until the late 1830s when the silk hat took the place of the beaver hat in European fashion circles that the demand for beaver tapered off. Rocky Mountain House and Acton House brought in their fair share of beaver pelts over the years, but they were just as important for their trade in buffalo meat and pemmican. These food stuffs were very important to the beaver trade in that they fed the brigades that hauled the furs and trade goods back and forth across the continent.


"CONTINENTAL"
COCKED HAT.
"NAVY"
COCKED HAT.
(1800)
ARMY. (1837)
CLERICAL.
(Eighteenth Century)
(THE WELLINGTON.)
CIVIL.
(THE PARIS BEAU.)
(1815)
(THE D'ORSAY.)

Eighteenth and nineteenth century beaver hats. (Castorologica, *Martins, 1892).*

John McDonald of Garth — Established first Rocky Mountain House fort (McCord Museum, Montreal).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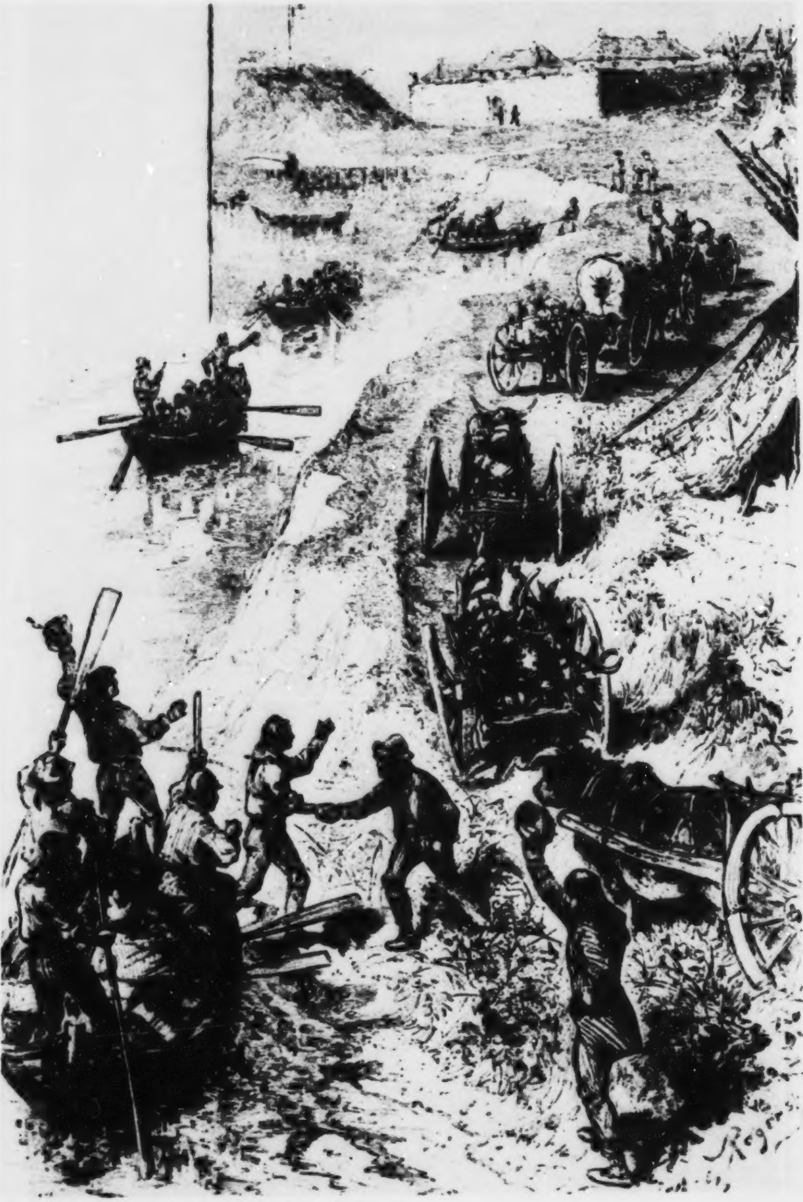
PIEGAN POST
RED DEER R.
BOW R.
FORT PITT
SOUTH SASKATCHEWAN R.
MARIAS R.
FORT BENTON
FORT PIEGAN
MISSOURI R.
MISSOURI R.



Brigade arriving at a fort (Glenbow Archives).

The Trade Year

The winter outfit of each trading fort arrived by the fall canoe brigade. If the river froze up and the brigade still hadn't arrived, it was time for the people of the fort to worry. The brigades brought the niceties of life — the tea and flour — but, in the form of trade goods, they also brought the basis of life. With nothing to trade, no meat could be procured from the Indians. That left the fort dependent on its contract hunters and other men who weren't always able to bring in enough to feed everyone.

The sight of the fall brigade emerging from the forest was cause therefore for jubilation, a sigh of relief attended by a party, wee hour dancing and the consumption of rum. If the fur traders were currently on speaking terms, the men of the "neighbour" fort were invited along.

Throughout the winter, groups of Indians arrived sporadically to trade their furs. When the men of the fort weren't occupied with the trade they were busy with a winter routine, mainly devoted to keeping warm and fed. The fort hunters searched the countryside for game; the woodcutters chopped down trees to keep the fires blazing and to supply the men in the boatyard with wood.

Come evening, the men smoked by the fire, played cards; the odd one might read. But most would lapse into what one visitor to a fur trade fort called "a sort of dreamy inactivity" that "prevents them from feeling what, to one brought from other habits, would be the supreme of dullness."

As spring neared, the workload changed. The buffalo meat traded for in locations like Rocky Mountain House had to be made into pemmican. The buffalo tongues were salted. Buffalo tongues were regarded as such a delicacy that quotas were established for their consumption: a chief trader could eat six a year, whereas a chief factor was allowed twelve. Last of all, the furs were pressed and lashed together into packs.

During its lifetime, Rocky Mountain House was both a year round post and a wintering post. When it was open year round, a skeleton staff stayed on for the summer to guard the establishment and to make hay. When it was operated as a wintering post (all the years but one between 1825 and 1861), the fort was abandoned in summer. The men of the forts and their families joined the spring brigade destined for posts downriver.

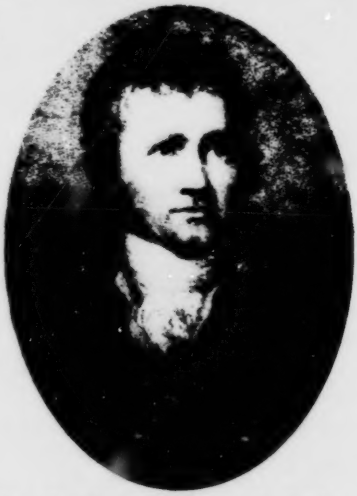
CHAPTER THREE

Crossing The Mountains

Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety three.

Alexander Mackenzie's grease and vermilion inscription on a rock in Dean Channel, culmination of his journey to the Pacific.

Magnificent Discoveries the Fur Trade Couldn't Use



Alexander Mackenzie, first to the Arctic, first to the Pacific, exploring for the North West Company (Glenbow Archives).

Alexander Mackenzie's 1793 land journey to the Pacific was a great achievement, but it wasn't the commercially viable Pacific trade route the companies were looking for. More exploration was needed and this was the second motive behind the North West Company's opening of Rocky Mountain House in 1799. A post that was two days' ride from the Rockies made an excellent jumping off point for their exploration. The Hudson's Bay Company's Acton House had no such added purpose. The Bay company felt it lacked the manpower to attempt transmountain trade.

This kind of conservative thinking had recently cost the Hudson's Bay Company the services of a brilliant young surveyor by the name of David Thompson. Thompson was ambitious and wanted to explore and map the unknown regions of North America, but had received so little encouragement that finally, in 1797, he crossed the only boundary there was to cross in this wilderness: that between the Hudson's Bay Company and its competitors.

The Nor'westers were exactly to Thompson's taste: as ambitious as he was and not cheap with their resources. Of the contrast between his old employers and his new, he wrote: "How very different the liberal and public spirit of the North West Company of Merchants of Canada from the mean selfish policy of the Hudson's Bay Company styled honourable; and whom, at little expense, might have had the northern part of the continent surveyed to the Pacific Ocean, and greatly extended their Trading Posts."

In 1800, Thompson found himself posted to Rocky Mountain House under the leadership of Duncan McGillivray, a Nor'wester wintering partner on the Saskatchewan. McGillivray was a wholehearted believer in the need to find an economical route to the Pacific and, what's more, intended to be the one who found it.

In October of 1800, while McGillivray was probing the mountain passes to the north, Thompson went south to the Red Deer River in search of the Kootenay Indians. He soon encountered many Peigan, the most warlike of the Blackfoot nation. Of the conversation that passed between them, he wrote: "(The Peigan) are so jealous of the Kootenays coming in to trade that they do all they can to persuade me to return, assuring me that it is impossible for me to find them and that, in endeavouring to search them out, our horses will fall by fatigue and hunger, and perhaps also ourselves."

Thompson pressed on and, at the foot of the mountains, he met the Kootenay — twenty-seven men and seven women. Their chief made Thompson a present of a horse loaded with beaver pelts. Thompson accepted the gifts (politeness demanded it) but not without noticing how little the Kootenay could afford their graciousness. They were poorly dressed, especially considering they had just crossed the cold, snowy mountains.

After a rugged trip in which most of their horses were stolen by the Peigan, Thompson and the Kootenay reached Rocky Mountain House. The Kootenay furs were traded, rum was offered and much conversation was had about river routes to the other side of the mountains. When the Kootenay were ready to leave, David Thompson sent two of his men back with them. These two, La Gassi and Le Blanc , were probably the first white men to cross the mountains by the North Saskatchewan route, the first also to winter in the mountain home of the Kootenay.

David Thompson's second trip from Rocky Mountain House, this time in the company of Duncan McGillivray, climaxed with a scramble up a mountain near the headwaters of the Bow River. It was Thompson's first view across the mountain tops. "Never before," he wrote, "did I behold so just, so perfect a resemblance to the waves of the ocean in a wintry storm. When looking upon them and attentively considering their wild order and appearance, the imagination was apt to say, these must once have been liquid and, in that state, when swelled to greatest agitation, suddenly congealed, made solid by power omnipotent."

Perhaps Thompson sensed that he would return one day to conquer this stormy sea. Duncan McGillivray, who wanted that conquest so badly, was to be denied. His health failed and he was forced to go East, never to return.

Exploration from Rocky Mountain House had not produced a usable route to the Pacific. The fort had also failed to attract the Kootenay in the numbers needed to sustain a profitable trade. In 1802, Rocky Mountain House was abandoned by the Nor'westers. The Hudson's Bay Company at Acton House was quick to follow suit.

A Fort Across the Mountains

Rocky Mountain House and Acton house remained closed for three seasons. When they reopened in the fall of 1805, it was still in hopes that the Kootenay would somehow evade the Peigan and descend on the North Saskatchewan forts with a treasure in furs. The Kootenay certainly tried hard; some actually crossed the mountains through deep snow carrying furs on their backs. But the harvest was disappointing. The Peigan and the Assiniboine brought more furs to Rocky Mountain House than the Kootenay did.

By 1806, it was clear that the Kootenay trade at Rocky Mountain House and Acton House had failed again. The companies showed their difference of character by making opposite plans. The Hudson's Bay Company couldn't say enough about the obstacles to pursuing the Kootenay across the mountains. The Rockies became formidable to the people of the Bay company, and the Kootenay were suddenly "too Idle and Small a tribe and their country too poor to support a separate trade." Fueled by a recent coalition with the rival XY Company, the Nor'westers were itching to cross the same mountains and were confident of profitable trade with the same Kootenay Indians. They sent their ace surveyor, David Thompson, back to Rocky Mountain House to prepare for a mountain-crossing expedition.

You might think that the sight of Thompson readying his expedition would have encouraged Hudson's Bay Company resolve. If so, it isn't evident in a letter James Bird, Hudson's Bay Company manager at Edmonton House, wrote in the spring of 1807. After giving a litany of reasons why the Bay company could never profit by taking its trade west, Bird expressed thinly disguised admiration for the upcoming Thompson voyage. The Nor'westers wanted to extend their trade to the Pacific, he wrote, "and are possessed of all the means requisite for such an undertaking."

Bird was right. In the summer of 1807, David Thompson ascended the North Saskatchewan from Rocky Mountain House. He abandoned his canoes and crossed the mountains by horse to the Columbia River where he built a fort named for the Indians with whom he had come to trade.

The success of Thompson's Kootenae House led to the closure and abandonment of both Acton House and Rocky Mountain House in the summer of 1807. With the North West Company operating in the heart of Kootenay territory, no one of that nation was apt to cross the mountains to trade. The difference was that the Nor'westers had gained a new and valuable position while the Hudson's Bay Company had lost yet another skirmish in the commercial war for furs.

The Peigan Stop Thompson's Columbia Brigade

Each time Thompson's Columbia brigade came out of the mountains heaped with furs, it was a sign to the Blackfoot that the Kootenay and their allies, the Flathead, were getting richer in firepower. In the summer of 1810, their fears were realized in blood. The Peigan were surprised by a party of Flathead coming out onto the plains. The Flathead were well armed and the Peigan suffered at least sixteen casualties. This convinced the Peigan that the Columbia trade had to be stopped, and by whatever means necessary.

As the Peigan made these war plans, a veteran fur trader by the name of Alexander Henry was riding cross-country to assume his duties as officer in charge of Rocky Mountain House. After another three-year hiatus, both Rocky Mountain House and Acton House were about to reopen.

This was to be a fall of unusual occurrences for Henry and the first one coincided exactly with his arrival at Rocky Mountain House. "Upon coming in sight of the old fort," he wrote, "we were surprised to see some people standing at the gate and smoke arising from within the stockades; on nearer approach our surprise increased when we observed them to be whites and Indians."

Henry's unexpected visitors were the men of David Thompson's Columbia brigade. Ascending the North Saskatchewan, they had been stopped and turned back by a war party of Peigan. Thrust into this crisis, Henry tried to figure out his next move. David Thompson wasn't with his brigade; he had been riding ahead, hunting and caching meat. Henry

Howse Pass

Nor'wester David Thompson's success in bringing Kootenay furs across the mountains finally spurred the Hudson's Bay Company to action. In 1809, the Bay Company sent Joseph Howse in Thompson's footsteps to explore and to determine if they should try trading in the mountains too. Howse' first trip up the Saskatchewan was short, but the next year, 1810, he penetrated into Flathead country where he wintered near present day Kalispell, Montana. Howse did bring out quite a few furs, but his company decided to abandon the transmountain trade to the Nor'westers in any case. The Bay company men may have been influenced by a rather strong message the Peigan delivered to them in the winter of 1810. They agreed not to molest Howse on this return from Flathead country, but declared that "if they again meet with a white man going to supply their Enemies, they would not only plunder and kill him, but they would make dry Meat of his body." (James Bird)

The great irony is that Howse, travelling along David Thompson's well-beaten mountain path, managed to have the pass named after him. To this day, Thompson's North Saskatchewan route to the Columbia is known as Howse Pass.

could only assume that Thompson was upriver, wondering about the whereabouts of his canoes.

Over the next few days, several Peigan who had been involved in the blockade turned up at Rocky Mountain House. Henry suspected that, if he could just get the canoes moving upriver again, they would reach Thompson and all would be well. But, every time he made a move to launch them, more Peigan arrived to trade. Tormenting him was the idea that, if the Peigan caught him sending canoes upstream they would not only stop them again, but would probably storm the fort.

Desperate, Henry took the visiting Indians into the fort and presented them with huge gifts of rum. By the time these Indians were asleep, more had arrived. Henry had no choice but to deal out more rum. Finally, with everybody dead drunk, Henry launched the canoes. They were headed upstream against a strong current, so the escape was anything but swift. The canoes had to be towed up the rapids and then loaded, all in the dead of night.

Still, the project went off fairly well and, next day, Henry was somewhat pleased with himself; that is, until shortly before noon, when his cousin, William Henry, whom he knew to have been with David Thompson, suddenly arrived *from downriver!* William had just come from Thompson's camp. Thompson was waiting *below* for his canoes while they were busily tracking upstream.

Henry had been partially right. Thompson had waited upriver for quite a while. When the brigade didn't show up, he had two of his men go downstream in search of it. They found the place where the brigade had been stopped and, from the signs — the remains of an Indian camp and a low rampart of stones the men of the brigade had built for defence — were able to deduce what had happened. When Thompson heard all this, he knew his camp was in terrible danger. He and his men fled into the heavy forest north of the river, hurrying to the Brazeau River and down it, coming out on the North Saskatchewan River below Rocky Mountain House.

Alexander Henry responded to his cousin's news by sending a man to stop the Columbia brigade a second time, while he rode downriver to talk to David Thompson. He found Thompson camped on a high hill, starving and angrily making plans. "His canoes having been stopped by Peigans," he wrote, "induced him to alter his route and endeavour to open a new road from North Branch to Buffalo Dung Lake to Athabasca River, and thence across the mountains to the Columbia. . . By this route we should never be subject to the control of the Slaves (Blackfoot), but should avoid their country and warlands entirely." Thompson knew such a change of plan was not going to be easy and predicted that the voyage "would be attended with great inconvenience, fatigue, suffering and privation; but there was no alternative."

The Athabasca Route to the Columbia

Today, when we travel highway 16, west through Jasper National Park, along the Athabasca River to the town of Jasper and then over the mountains, the trip is comfortable. We can sit back and enjoy the sights. A person has to stretch his imagination to appreciate what it would have been like to travel the same route, on a sketchy path in the dead of winter, as David Thompson did in 1810-11. Just to reach the Athabasca River from Rocky Mountain House, Thompson had to battle through heavy forest. Then, after five days along the Athabasca, his guide, Thomas, an Iroquois, told him they must abandon the horses and continue with snowshoes and dogsleds. These had to be built on the spot and there was also meat to hunt for and prepare, all with the temperature hovering at minus thirty Fahrenheit. It was December 30 before they could start the climb.

On January 10, a steep snowy ascent stood before the expedition. Thompson was sure it was the "height of land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans," and felt exhilarated. His men, having "no scientific object in view" felt differently. "My men," wrote Thompson, "are the

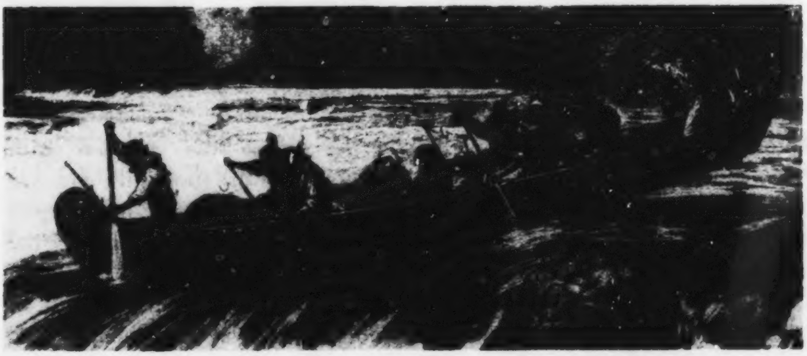
The Voyageurs

The forgotten heroes of the period of mountain exploration are the voyageurs. In every canoe that carried explorers and ferried men and goods, there was a bowman and a steersman, and usually several middlemen. In the beginning, the voyageurs were French Canadian, from Montreal as a rule, but because the voyageurs so frequently took Indian or Métis wives, succeeding generations were often Métis. This would have been true in Thompson's and Mackenzie's day.

The voyageurs were often short men, very broad across the shoulders and through the chest. They had to be immensely strong to bear up under the weight of the loads they carried across the portage and to spend entire days "tracking," towing canoes upriver by a line from shore. Most traders expected their voyageurs to move goods along the portage at a trot, and George Simpson, the Hudson's Bay Company governor who loved to travel at great speed, seemed to view his voyageurs as machines fueled by rum. He spoke of "dramming" his men four times a day.

Given the kind of work the voyageurs did, it is not surprising that they had good appetites, but many a trader was amazed and a bit disgusted by just how much food a voyageur could put away. David Thompson wrote that a voyageur "has the appetite of a Wolf and glories in it; each man requires eight pounds of meat per day or more; upon my reproaching some of them for their gluttony, the reply I got was, 'What pleasure have we in Life but eating!'"

The voyageurs were not without their vanities. Before they arrived at a fort, they stopped to clean up and put on their finest clothes. Taking up the paddle again, they would break into one of their paddling songs to announce themselves in dramatic fashion.



Frances Hopkins' Running a rapid on the Mattawa River. *(PAC C-13585). Each canoe that carried the explorers and fur traders had a bowman, steersman and usually several middlemen.*

David Thompson (1770-1857)

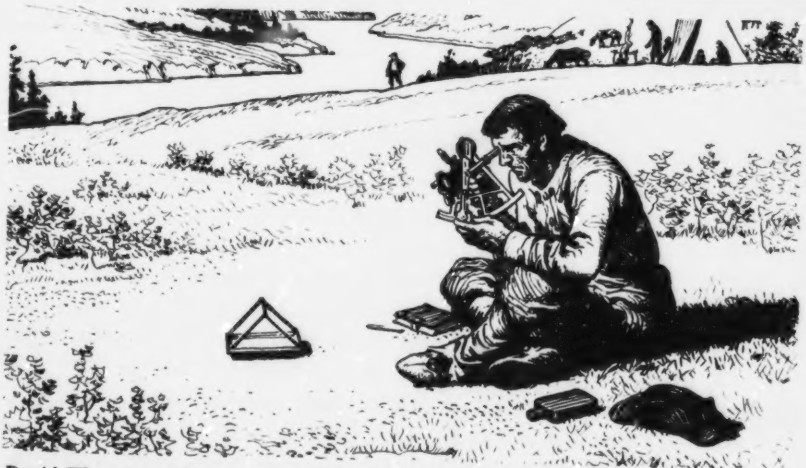
In 1813, David Thompson poured his life's work into a map of Western Canada so accurate that parts of it were still in use in the 20th century. The geographers who followed him marveled at his map's accuracy.

Thompson was born in England and went to a poor boys' school in Westminster. Having studied navigation, his name was given to the Hudson's Bay Company when it came looking for boys to apprentice in the North American fur trade. He worked for the Bay company for thirteen years, but felt stifled. In 1797, he left to join the competition. To his delight, he found the Nor'westers only too willing to send him into unknown territory and to provide him with the men and equipment he needed. So it was that he came to Rocky Mountain House in 1800 and again in 1806.

Rocky Mountain House must have held a sentimental place in Thompson's heart. It was here he spent the second year of his marriage to Charlotte Small and here she bore him their first child, a girl.

Thompson's explorations and his map were a great contribution to his own times, but his writings are probably his finest contribution to ours. He wrote of the Indian people with great understanding and, from his conversations with their elders, he recorded how Indians lived and made war before the horse and the gun.

No picture of David Thompson exists, but a daughter of his once supplied a picture of John Bunyan as being the next best thing. He was short and compact, and a naturalist who met him in 1817 described him as having deeply furrowed features and a gardener's ruddy complexion. "His cut short nose gave him an odd look," but his eyes were friendly and intelligent.



David Thompson taking an observation. No picture was drawn of David Thompson in his lifetime. C. W. Jeffreys filled the gap with this image of the mapmaker. (PAC C-73573) most hardy that could be picked out of a hundred brave hardy men, but the scene of desolation before us was dreadful."

They climbed slowly and, by evening, made camp and a fire. It quickly burned itself out and they were left exposed on the flank of the mountain in darkness. They were very near the summit, a sheer wall of rock reared beside them and, a little farther away, a huge glacier. They all knew that, should an Arctic storm brew up in the night, it was almost certain doom. With considerable understatement, Thompson described the mood of his men as "strong feelings of personal insecurity." But the night passed quietly.

The next morning, the expedition began a descent so steep that dogs and sled slid out of control. After several days of slogging they reached the Columbia. In the spring, Thompson descended to the Pacific Ocean and, at the mouth of the Columbia River, he found Fort Astoria, an American Fur Company establishment with two former Nor'westers in charge. Nothing in Thompson's journals suggests that he was surprised or disappointed to find this. In the last four years, he had established his company's control over most of the Columbia watershed. He seemed content to let the Americans have the bit of trade at the river's mouth.

This incredible journey, starting at Rocky Mountain House and ending on salt water, had a great impact on the future of that fort and its neighbour Acton House. To date, their history had always been connected with trade and exploration west of the mountains; but now that Thompson had proven the Columbia traffic could more safely cross the mountains by the Athabasca route, Rocky Mountain House's days as a jumping off spot for mountain trade and exploration were over. The pleasant clearing on the North Saskatchewan was now and forever off the main transportation and communication route of the fur trade. The future for both Rocky Mountain House and Acton House depended solely on the Plains Indian trade, particularly that of the Peigan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alexander Henry's Journal The Winter of 1810-11

They fain would wreak their vengence upon us, but dread the consequences as it would deprive them in future of arms and ammunition, tobacco and above all, their favorite liquor, high wine.

Alexander Henry with reference to the
Peigan at Rocky Mountain House, 1810

A Busy Fall

When Alexander Henry arrived at Rocky Mountain House in the fall of 1810, the fort was in dreadful shape after being abandoned for three seasons. But, for the first while, he lacked time to do much about it. When the Indians were in to trade, most hands were busy. Some stood guard in the bastions and above the Indian hall, others watched the horses in case young warriors tried to steal them; still others worked right in the trading rooms, shifting the furs and trade goods, and doling out liquor. But Henry laid the blame for the slowness of repairs on another cause. "The rotten old buildings are falling to pieces," he wrote. "The men (are) extremely lazy."

On October 18, thirteen days after Henry took possession of Rocky Mountain House, the Hudson's Bay Company party arrived to open Acton House. Henry wrote: "These poor fellows have suffered much in the cold water, snow and ice, having had to track continually. Their boats are not constructed for pulling up the currents as our canoes are." Here, he is speaking of the Bay company's York boat, a large and heavy craft built after an Orkney Islands design. Being so much larger than the Nor'westers' canoes, it was a problem to move in low water.

For the rest of October, trade at the two forts was brisk. Partly because the business was so well-oiled with liquor, it was usually turbulent. Drunken arguments erupted and Henry was constantly complaining about the "insolence" of his customers. But this was a minor vexation compared to the diplomatic crisis that developed on October 28 when Henry's contract hunter, a Cree, came to the fort while the Peigan and Sarcee were in to trade. The Cree and the Blackfoot were enemies and there had been bloodshed between them during the previous summer.

Henry quickly cleared the fort, shut the gate and kept the Cree locked inside. The night that followed was all "bustle and confusion." The Cree managed to escape; plots hatched to murder him; the traders busily handed out rum to "pacify" the Indians. The Cree survived the night and Henry was much relieved. He wrote: "A surley dog he is (the Cree); but had he been killed, the consequences would have proved serious for us."

What Henry feared most was a general uprising of the Peigan who "could have called in a great re-enforcement in a few hours." Henry looked at the river which was too low for a quick escape and knew that, if such a confrontation developed, he would have little choice but to fight "to the last man."

Preparing for Winter

Alexander Henry described November 7, 1810, as "the first real quiet day we have had since our arrival." The initial flood of customers at Rocky Mountain House was abating and the men at both forts could focus on preparations for winter. A certain amount had already been done, but not enough to please Henry. Shortly after their arrival, he had had his men take off the "rotten old coverings" of the houses, and, by October 26th, Henry's room in the fort was finished and he was able to move out of his leather tent. He was "happy to get clear from that smokey dwelling"; and some of his men, having no wooden homes as yet, were just as happy to move in.

The men's houses were traditionally the last thing built. The trading house, or Indian hall, was the first priority, followed by the store room, ice house, chief trader's residence, blacksmith shop, bastions and palisade, not necessarily in that order. How quickly they started work on the fort's defence apparatus depended on how much personal danger they perceived. The Rocky Mountain House bastions and gates weren't finished until December 1, and Henry was far from satisfied with them. "They are wretched buildings for defence."

Even when trade was slow, the winter days were busy. Henry left a good description of the general bustle of November 20. "B. Desjarlaix hunting; seven men out to raise dog teams; four laying up canoes and clearing the fort; one making a wood train; one off for meat; one cutting wood; one carting; one making kegs. Our canoes are much split by the frost, and four of our large axes broke today, being nearly as brittle as glass." The average work day was probably a variation of this. To keep meat in the ice house, wood on the fire, and a reasonable roof overhead meant a never-ending cycle of hunting, wood-cutting and repair.

It is fortunate for us that Alexander Henry kept such a detailed journal. Henry marked the extraordinary and the routine, but special happenings were scarce at Rocky Mountain House. His concerns ranged from the smoking chimneys to the plight of Willy Flett's son over at Acton House. Flett's boy was so ill he could only eat chocolate.

The horses belonging to the fort were an ongoing concern. The horsekeeper was obliged to move them often in search of forage. In summer, the Rocky Mountain House horse herd could live quite nicely on the goose-grass that grew in the "muskegs" north of the fort; but in winter the goose-grass became brittle. When the horses pawed the snow to break the crust, the grass shattered to powder and couldn't be eaten.

Feeding the people of the fort was also difficult. They subsisted primarily on meat. The meat came from the fort's contract hunters and other men hunting in their spare time, or from trade with the Indians. The diet was varied with a few luxury goods brought in on the fall brigade (tea, sugar, flour), and with vegetables grown in the fort's own garden. Or that at least was the theory. Rocky Mountain House, being so close to the mountains, was beset by frequent summer frosts and the garden usually succumbed before it reached maturity.

A food crisis could develop almost any time, but such a problem was most likely to arise in mid-winter when few Indians came in to trade. If at the same time the fort's hunters ran into misfortune or bad luck, the fort would go hungry.

On December 30, 1810, a food crisis was triggered at Rocky by the arrival of seven men from Thompson's Athabasca brigade. They were starved when they came and expected a supply of provisions, dogs and horses.

Henry wrote: "We have no more meat in store than will answer for eight days' rations and of other provisions not a mouthful. Our hunters are lazy and when we shall see an Indian to bring a supply, God knows." By January 9, they were down to one day's rations in store. Henry does not say how this situation was resolved; perhaps he was too hungry to write about it. It is January 21 before he reports that one of his men, Dumont, returned with meat from the Peigan buffalo pound. Throughout the rest of the winter, the Peigan kept them better supplied.

Trade Ceremony

Fur traders like Alexander Henry would have probably preferred doing fur trade business the white man's way: a simple exchange of goods capped off with a handshake. But that was not the Indian way. For the Indian people, meetings and transactions were ceremonial occasions requiring offerings and shows of respect. Given that the Indians, if dissatisfied, could take their furs elsewhere, the traders forgot their preferences and tried to outdo one another in ritual and extravagance.

Alexander Henry left the most detailed description of the trade ceremony at Rocky Mountain House. When a tribe arrived, it was traditional to send young messengers ahead to the fort. These emissaries looked the fort and traders over and asked for tobacco for each of the chiefs and head men they represented. "Six inches of our twist tobacco is commonly sent, neatly done up in paper, to which is tied a small piece of vermilion, both being considered tokens of friendship."

When the tobacco had been delivered and smoked, the tribe came to the fort and the women put up the tipis near the stockade. This finished, "the men rise and move toward the fort in Indian file, the principal chief taking the lead, the others falling in according to rank or precedence, derived from the number of scalps taken in war." If the tribe had a flag with them, the flag bearer went ahead.

It was then the trader's turn to make a show of good will. He would leave the fort and go out to shake hands with the visitors. The farther away from the fort he did this, the more trust he was showing and, the greater the compliment. The trader then led the Indians into the Indian hall where the chief took the seat of honour and everyone else arranged themselves according to rank. The trader lit his pipe and gave it to the chief to smoke.

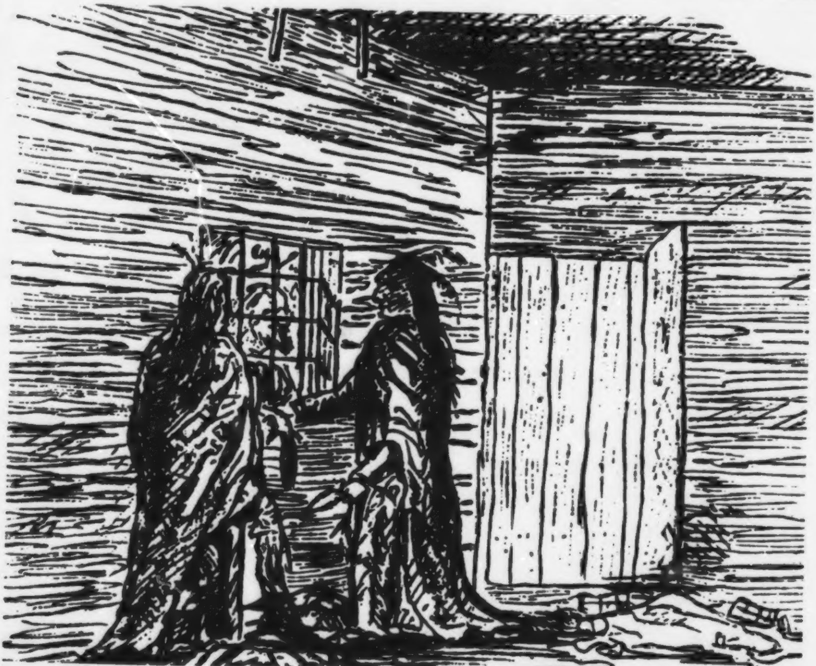
Traders often spoke irritably of the time-consuming, "superstitious" rituals that went with pipe smoking. Few seemed to see the religious significance the act had for the Indians. Each head man had his own particular way of smoking, but generally the first puff would be blown toward the earth while the pipe stem was pointed up. The second puff would be offered skyward, while the stem was pointed down. The pipe was then handed round in the direction of the rotation of the sun. When the trader's pipe had been smoked by everyone, the Indians would bring out their pipes and several would circulate at once.

Gifts were exchanged early in the ritual. Furs and fox skin caps were brought up and stacked upon the trader who would respond with gifts of rum. Again, the Indians would offer the first drops of liquor to earth and sky. Speeches were made and the Indians sang, accompanying themselves with rattles.

This stage of the ceremony would end with the trader giving each man a keg of liquor. The Indians then returned to their tents to drink and sing, and trading wouldn't begin until the next day.

How the actual trade was carried out varied with the level of suspicion between trader and tribe. In *The Great Lone Land*, W. F. Butler described the method of trade at Rocky Mountain House in 1870. "The outer gate is thrown open," he wrote, "and a large throng enters the Indian room. Three or four of the first comers are now admitted through a narrow passage into the trading shop. . . .The first Indians admitted hand in their peltries through a wood grating, and receive in exchange so many blankets, beads or strouds. Out they go to the large hall where their comrades are anxiously awaiting their return, and in rush another batch, and the doors are locked again."

The fear of being attacked by the Indians while they were inside the fort had changed little from Alexander Henry's day to this. From the garret above the Indian hall, guns still pointed down through loopholes, a slight contradiction to the pleasantries of the ceremony. But even this was trusting compared to methods that were employed at Rocky Mountain House in the 1850s, the most violent period in its history. At that time, the Indians weren't allowed into the fort at all after the initial ceremony. The trade, mostly for rum, was conducted through twenty-inch loopholes in the fort's stockades.



Charles Gasche's sketch of trading room at Rocky Mountain House in the 1870s. Note the rifle barrels sticking through loopholes in the ceiling (Parks Canada).

On the more positive side, two events stood out in the fur trader's year: Christmas and New Year. Of Christmas 1810 Henry says only that he kept it at his neighbour's (Acton House). Likely, they took a large meal together. The New Year of 1811 was marked by a dance at Rocky Mountain House which didn't break up until two in the morning.

No details of this dance are given, but it was probably to the music of a single fiddler, with Red River jigs making up a good portion of the program. This music and style of fancy footwork have survived in Métis culture to the present day and can be seen at Métis celebrations across Western Canada.

When Henry's dance finally broke up, he gave each of his men a pint of liquor. The logical consequence is mentioned in his one line reference to January 2. "Men drunk all day and went to sleep." On the third, it was the old women's turn to "enjoy their cups." Business as usual didn't resume until the fourth.

Rocky Mountain House Threatened

After a winter of fearing what the Peigan might do to avenge the Nor'westers trade with the Kootenay, the greatest threat to Rocky Mountain House in Alexander Henry's time came from a totally different source. Returning from a trip into the mountains, Henry found his fort buzzing with rumours that the Gros Ventre Indians were assembling to attack. The Gros Ventre (Atsina), also known to the fur traders as the Fall Indians, hunted on the land immediately north of the Missouri River and east of Peigan country. They had the distinction of being the only Plains tribe ever to attack a fort on the Saskatchewan River system.

With that in mind, and with trusted Peigan coming in daily to warn him, Henry took action. "I repaired the bastions, and made a number of loopholes in the shop and garret bearing directly down upon the Indian hall, where, if there should be any quarrel, it would of course begin. We should thus be able to destroy a good many before they could get out of the house, and then the guard in the bastions could take them in their retreat toward the gates, where also the bastions bore full upon them, and many could be killed as they crowded through. Furthermore, the bastions would bear upon those who should get out of the fort until they retreated beyond the reach of our guns."

But for all Henry's preparations, he did not feel safe. "All this was well enough planned," he added, "but I doubted the courage of my men, as I had frequently suffered in consequence of their cowardly behaviour on such occasions, when at the first fire from Indians, three out of four men ran to hide themselves, leaving me in the lurch to defend myself and property as best I could."

A tense vigil began. As he waited, Henry felt victimized. "I could not believe that people whom I had always treated so well could be such villains as to meditate mischief." His relations with the Gros Ventre had been good. He seemed to view them as "model Indians." That is, they had always been quiet at his fort and took what he offered for their furs without quarrel. They also paid willingly for their rum. This had been a sore point in Henry's dealings with the Blackfoot, who refused to pay in furs for what they regarded as "water." They expected rum to be given as a gift.

Henry pressed his informants for possible reasons why the Gros Ventre had turned on him. It came out that they were angry at treatment they had received from the traders at Fort Augustus. But an even more compelling reason was that on their southern border, the Missouri, American traders had been arming their enemies the Crow. The Crow bragged that they would soon come to war with the Americans fighting on their side. The Gros Ventre faced an awful prospect: being forced off their lands and into the territory of another set of enemies, the Cree and Assiniboine. They had decided their only hope lay in pillaging Rocky Mountain House for guns with which to defend themselves against the Crow.

But the attack did not come. Bearing down on Rocky Mountain House, they were met by Peigan messengers. The message was simple: attack Rocky Mountain House and you are at war with the Peigan.

Ever since the Peigan had heard the Gros Ventre war plans, they had been in council surmising what such an attack would mean to them. Rocky Mountain House was their fort, opened to serve them. If it and Acton House closed because of an attack, the Peigan would have to trade at Fort Augustus and Edmonton House in the territory of their enemies, the Assiniboine and Cree. To prevent this, they had to stand with the traders against their sometime allies, the Gros Ventre. Hearing this, the Gros Ventre called off the attack and returned south.

The trading companies had a strange way of showing gratitude. Rocky Mountain House and Acton House were kept open for one more season and then both were closed. The companies' rationale was that they could more economically trade with the Peigan and the other Blackfoot alliance tribes at Edmonton House and Fort Augustus.

The Peigan must have been enraged. The situation they had feared was now forced upon them. To maintain their strength in arms and ammunition, they had to trade in the land of their enemies, which probably meant war. In all likelihood they wondered why they had bothered to save the men at Rocky Mountain House and Acton House. It had gained them nothing.

Women in the Fur Trade

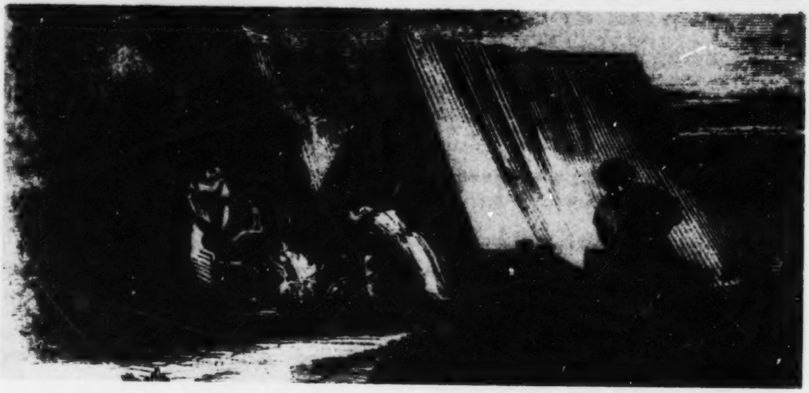
One could easily get the impression from first-hand accounts of the fur trade that there were no women involved in it. In truth, almost as many women as men toiled in the trade and lived at the posts. An employee's family was fed at the expense of the company, but this was far from largesse. For their keep, women made pemmican, tanned leather, sewed buckskin clothing, collected berries and cooked; all of which overlooks the fact that they were also bearing and raising the next generation of labourers for the trade. Voyageurs often travelled with their wives and, while the men bore loads across the portage, the women took to the forest in search of tree gum to waterproof the canoes.

The women of the fur trade were almost all native or of mixed blood. Their marriages to the voyageurs and company officers in the early days were "à la façon du pays," meaning with little ceremony beyond simple choice. Partly, this was for lack of men of the cloth, and when the missionaries did come west, many of the marriages at Rocky Mountain House and elsewhere were solemnized. Very often though, the company traders and officers left their "country wives" and children when they left the company's service. In later years, this practice of abandoning "country wives" became unpopular. The traders who did stick by their native or mixed-blood wives and children rebelled at having their daughters and nieces treated in such a callous way.

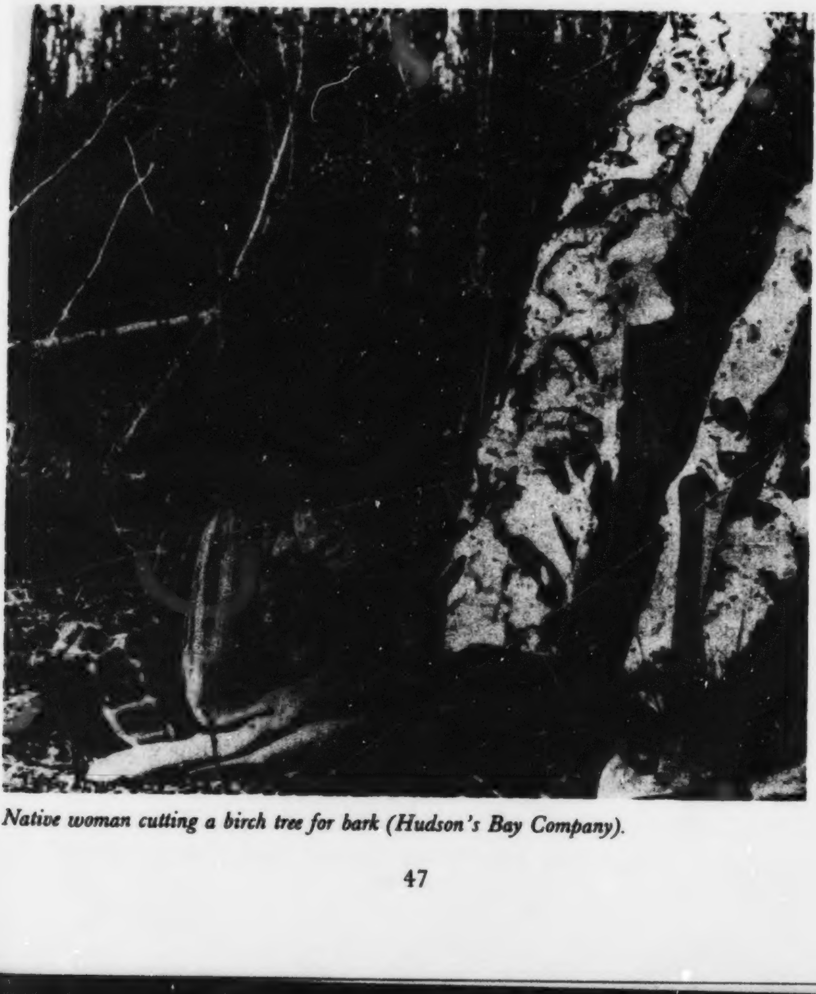
Also, to be fair, it must be mentioned that, for many, the bond of a country marriage was as solemn as one made in church. J. E. Harriott, who was in charge of Rocky Mountain House for almost two decades, argued this forcefully, claiming that he knew hundreds of people "living and dying with the woman they took in that way without any other formalities."

The courage of these women, their strength and ability, has not gone totally unrecorded. John Rowand, who was in charge of Rocky Mountain House at the time of amalgamation, was saved from almost certain death by a mixed-blood woman from Edmonton House, Louise Umfreville. And William Gladstone, a boatbuilder at Rocky Mountain House, had his life saved by his Métis wife on at least two occasions; once when he fell through the ice on a cold day and, another time, when a prospector pulled a gun to shoot him. Gladstone's wife knocked the gun out of the man's hand with an axe.

Alexander Henry left Rocky Mountain House in the spring of 1811, perhaps feeling relieved to get away. The season he had just put in was far from the most peaceful in his fur trade career. He was re-posted to the lower Columbia and there, in 1814, he died. Crossing from shore to ship, the small boat he was in capsized and he was drowned.



The women of the fur trade worked hard for their keep (Glenbow Archives).



Native woman cutting a birch tree for bark (Hudson's Bay Company).

CHAPTER FIVE

Fur Trade War and Coalition

> The greater part of the Northwest Company and Hudson's Bay people live on amicable terms; and when one can with propriety render service to the other, it is done with cheerfulness.
>
> Daniel Harmon,
> Nor'wester, 1807

The Hudson's Bay Company Revival

Lord Selkirk (PAC C-1346).

The Nor'westers at Rocky Mountain House and the Bay company people at Acton House got on well in the early years. They often travelled together for safety. They shared news, joined in one another's celebrations, mourned one another's sadnesses. Part of the reason for this amicability, especially before 1810, was the unchallenged commercial superiority of the Nor'westers. In 1810, Alexander Henry casually mentioned in his journal that three Indians were trading at his fort to every one at Acton House. He wasn't jubilant over this; it was simply the way things *ought* to be. The Nor'westers believed it was just a matter of time before the Hudson's Bay Company was absorbed by them, as had happened with other rivals.

Predictably the good will between the companies began to erode the moment the Hudson's Bay Company showed signs of life. During David Thompson's and Alexander Henry's time at Rocky Mountain House, the Hudson's Bay Company was undergoing a change of management and attitude. It determined to challenge the Nor'wester monopoly in the Athabasca District, and it also granted a large shareholder, Lord Selkirk, 116,000 square miles of land south of Lake Winnipeg to start an agricultural colony.

In 1814, the governor of this Selkirk colony made the kind of announcement the Nor'westers had been expecting. He declared it illegal to export pemmican from colony lands.

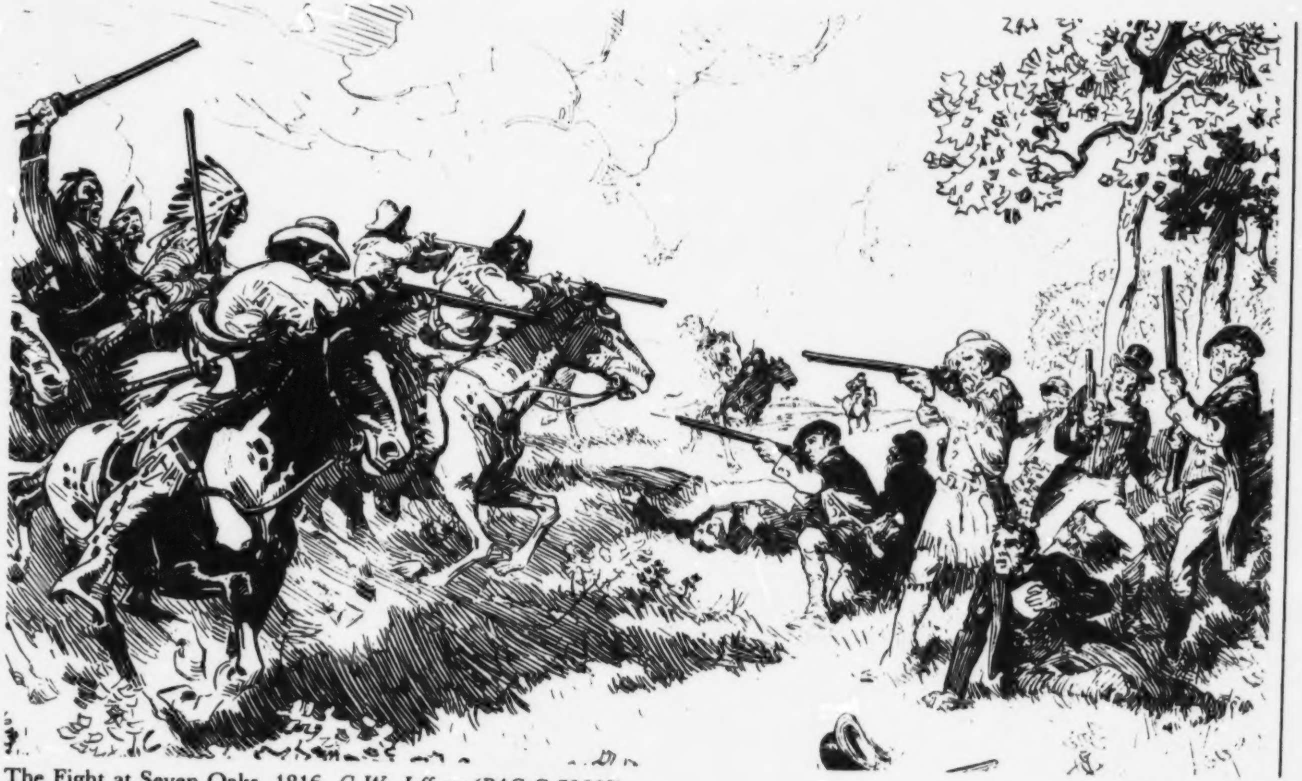
At that time, much of the pemmican on which the Nor'wester brigades depended was traded to them by Métis buffalo hunters living right at Red River; that is, on colony land. The Nor'westers and the Métis too saw this as a declaration of war. From there, the conflict escalated until, in 1816, thirty-five Métis killed the Governor of the Red River colony and twenty-one settlers at the Battle of Seven Oaks. It was the worst violence of the fur conflict, but the antagonism lasted for several more years.

Rocky Mountain House and Acton House played no direct part in most of this war because the two were closed for much of the decade in which it took place. The conflict that prompted their reopening was quite a different one, that between the Blackfoot and the alliance of the Assiniboine and Cree at Fort Augustus and Edmonton House. The earlier closures at Rocky Mountain House had forced the Blackfoot to trade at Edmonton House where their contact with the Cree and Assiniboine had led to friction and war. The situation had become so harmful to trade that Rocky Mountain House and Acton House were reopened in 1819 to keep the Blackfoot and the Cree-Assiniboine alliance apart.

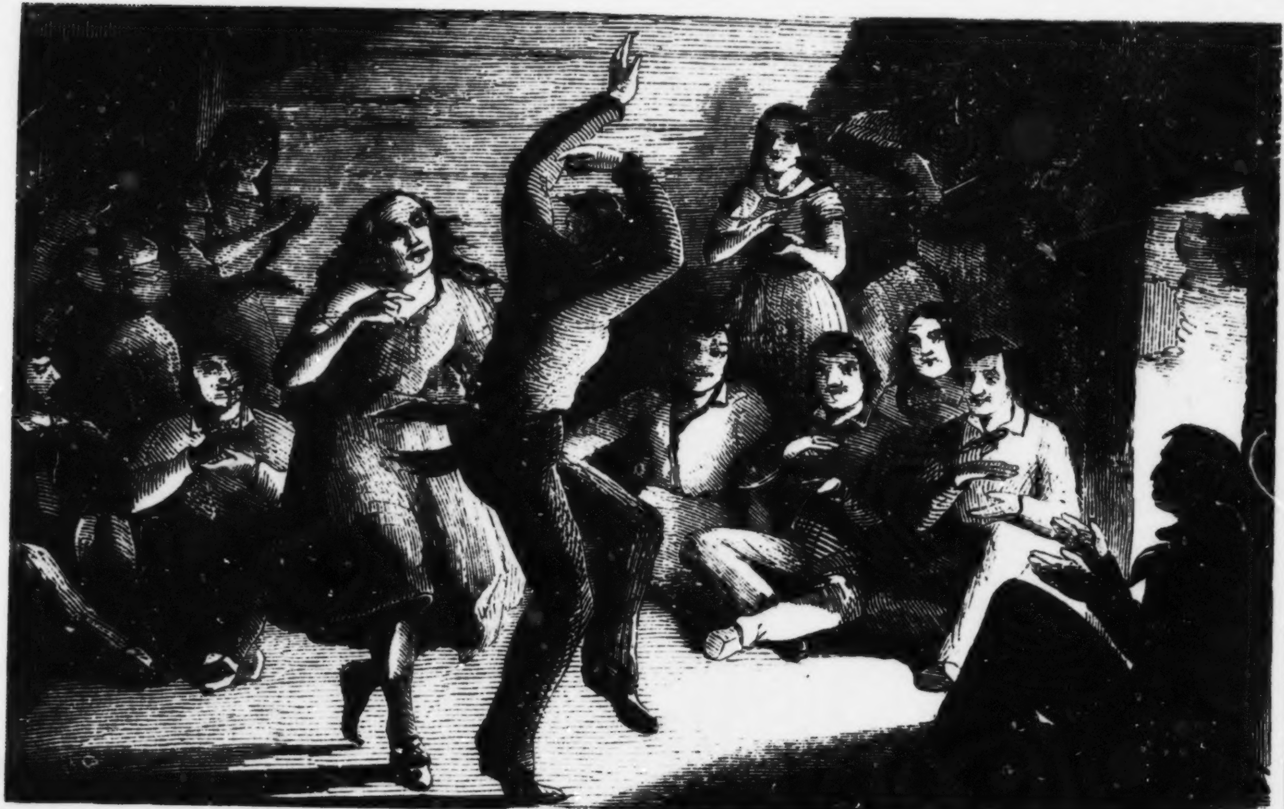
The new boss at Rocky Mountain House was John Rowand, a man who would figure in the region's history for many years. Rowand was Montreal-born, the son of an Irish physician. He joined the North West Company in 1803, and was sent to Red River at the height of the hostilities, his aggressiveness being well suited to the conflict. When he arrived at Rocky Mountain House, he apparently tried to stir up trouble between the companies there as well. A pact had been concluded to keep the peace along the Saskatchewan, but in December, 1820, the people of Acton House accused Rowand of having broken five of its articles.

In the summer of 1821, the fur war ended quietly and suddenly. A circular letter arrived at Fort Augustus and Edmonton House to be read by or to all employees in the fur trade. What it said was that the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were no longer combatants or even rivals: they were one in the same company to be called in future the Hudson's Bay Company.

No record exists of how this news was received by the proprietors of Acton House and Rocky Mountain House, so we are free to imagine it. John Rowand, never a peaceable man, probably grumbled and raged awhile before making any move. He was likely relishing the fight and looking forward to winning it. Now he had to swallow the idea that the Hudson's Bay Company, so long the virtual whipping boy of the Nor'westers, was by legal contract their partner and equal.

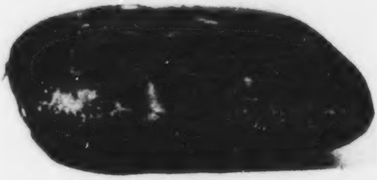


The Fight at Seven Oaks, 1816, *C.W. Jefferys (PAC C-73663).*



Red River jig, 1860, sketched by Manton Marble (Glenbow Archives).

The Importance of Pemmican



It is not surprising that pemmican was at the root of the bloodiest fight in the North West fur trade. Pemmican was the "grub" on which the fur trade operated. It was protein that did not spoil, and it isn't too far-fetched to say that it was pemmican that enabled the North West Company to stretch its Montreal-based empire north to the Athabasca and west to the Pacific Ocean. With a supply of pemmican, the canoe brigades did not have to stop to hunt and this allowed them to make immense journeys in the season of open water. Conversely, without pemmican, the Nor'westers were crippled. When the Hudson's Bay Company threatened the Nor'wester pemmican supply at Red River, it led to war.

The Hudson's Bay Company had been much slower to realize the value of pemmican. John Clarke of the Bay company took an expedition to Athabasca in 1815 and refused to "drag grease with." When the Nor'westers kept the Indians from supplying Clarke and his men with meat, sixteen of them starved to death.

Pemmican was an Indian invention, used by them for the purpose of surviving those times when the hunt failed. It was usually made from the tougher parts of the buffalo: the hams, shoulders and sinews. These were dried in the sun, then flayed into powder, a product called "pounded meat." The tallow and hard fat of the buffalo were melted and poured on the pounded meat and the two were stirred together until the meat was saturated. Sometimes dried berries were added for flavour. Finally, the mixture was shovelled into hide bags which were quickly sewed up and knocked into a square shape before the contents hardened.

The Indian tribes who traded at Rocky Mountain House were buffalo hunters more than trappers. The fort therefore often brought in more meat and pemmican than it did furs. The spring brigade hauled away the pemmican to the principal provisioning posts. The company left large supplies of pemmican stored at these forts along the major canoe routes so the summer brigades could quickly reload and keep going.

CHAPTER SIX

Indian Tribes The Customer-Clients of The Fur Trade

> Without iron, man is weak, very weak, but armed with iron, he becomes Lord of the Earth.
>
> David Thompson

The Price of Rapid Change

The pattern by which European technology changed the lives of North American Indians had about it a terrible logic. The first tribes to acquire iron were able to defeat their neighbours who had none. The vanquished were pushed off their lands and into conflict with the tribes whose land they entered.

When the Hudson's Bay Company received its new lease on life through amalgamation in 1821, it had been transacting business for 150 years. When it started up its posts on Hudson Bay, some of the

Father Lacombe in the midst of a battle between the Cree and the Blackfoot. From a drawing by Frederic Remington (Glenbow Archives).

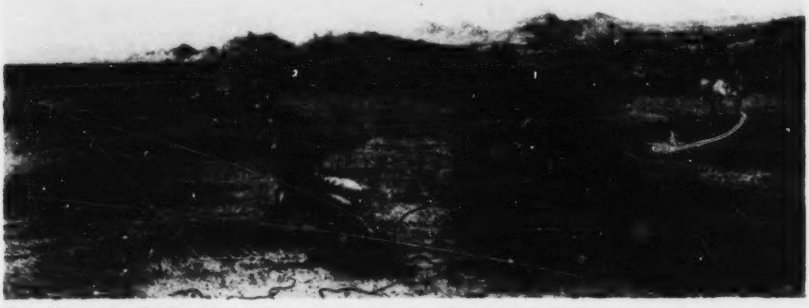
company's first customers were the Cree and Assiniboine. With their knives and guns, their axes and iron arrow points, these tribes soon began to spread west. This movement put pressure on all those living in their path. Over the next century, the Gros Ventre were pushed west toward the mountains; and the Kootenay, having even fewer iron weapons than the Blackfoot, were swept before them right off the plains and into the mountains.

Another extraordinary change in Indian life came from the south, this time courtesy of the Spanish. Early in the 18th century, the Peigan Indians were frightened by stories of some enormous animal upon which their southern enemies now rode to war. One of these beasts was shot from under a Snake Indian rider and many Peigan travelled to see it. An Indian elder telling the story to David Thompson said, "He put us in mind of a Stag that had lost his horns; and we did not know the name to give him. But as he was a slave to Man, like the dog, which carried our things; he was named the Big Dog."

In Cree, the animal was the "Big Dog"; in Blackfoot, the "Big Elk Dog"; and it was not long until all the plains tribes had this animal to serve and bear them.

Tribes travelling on foot seldom came into collision; and, when they did, the battles were more ceremonial than fatal. With the horse, the tribes moved faster and farther, and those collisions became both more frequent and more lethal. Horse-stealing was a new way for a young man to prove his mettle.

So it was that life on the plains was changed by conquest and fur trade well in advance of the white trader.



Catching the Wild Horse, *by Catlin George. When Spanish horses found their way onto the plains, they changed the Indian way of life. Tribes on foot made war infrequently; tribes on horseback came into collision often and with more lethal results (PAC C100027).*

The Kootenay

A Kootenay Chief (Parks Canada).

In the years spanned by the fur trade era at Rocky Mountain House, the Kootenay Indians were living in the Rocky Mountains. There was quite a bit of evidence though to suggest that it hadn't always been so. In 1810, Alexander Henry noted in his journal that, "along the Clearwater and near the foot of the mountains are still to be seen the remains of some of the dwellings of the Kootenays, built of wood, straw and pine branches. . . This gives us every reason to suppose that nation formerly dwelt along the foot of these mountains and even as far down as our present establishment (Rocky Mountain House)."

Given that life in the mountains was more difficult than life among the buffalo on the east side of the mountains, a compelling reason must have existed for the move. David Thompson shone some light on this when he wrote that the Kootenay were driven over the mountains by the Blackfoot armed with white man's guns. The Kootenay and the easternmost tribes of the Flathead shared a desire to acquire guns and assert themselves as buffalo hunters on the plains. They were allied in this cause against the Peigan, the vanguard tribe of the Blackfoot alliance.

The Kootenay were difficult for the fur traders to place in the grand territorial scheme of the West. They were a taller people than the Plains Indians and they spoke a different language. Still, the Kootenay shared more cultural characteristics with the Plains Indians than they did with the tribes of the Pacific Coast or even with other tribes of the mountain interior. They dressed like Plains Indians in clothing made of skins. Their artwork contained geometric figures like those done on the plains, and very unlike the carved totemic figures of the coast.

Few Kootenay ever traded at Rocky Mountain House and probably none of their allies, the Flathead, ever did. Yet both of these tribes affected the history of the fort. The Kootenay were the cause of the first fort's being built there, and it was the Flathead victory over the Peigan in 1810 that so ignited the Peigan fury that they blockaded the North Saskatchewan, preventing Thompson's Columbia brigade from getting through. The blockade forced the Nor'westers to change their Columbia trade route from the North Saskatchewan to the Athabasca River, a move that left Rocky Mountain House off the trade thoroughfare forever.

The Peigan, Blackfoot and Blood Indians

The combining of the Peigan, Blackfoot and Blood tribes under the title Blackfoot was something done by the white man. The tribes were usually allied and they spoke similar Algonkian languages; but they lived separately, under separate leadership.

The Blackfoot alliance was perceived by the white man to be totally devoted to war. Surrounded by enemies, it certainly needed to be well organized for that purpose. The Peigan were the people of the western frontier and were almost always in a state of war with the Kootenay and Flathead. The Blood and Blackfoot proper had to be more concerned with enemies to the east. As a whole, the alliance was generally at peace with the Gros Ventre to the immediate south and with the small tribe of Sarcee who lived in its midst.

The military side of the Blackfoot, which so concerned the traders, masked a profoundly religious aspect. When David Thompson travelled to the plains from Rocky Mountain House in 1800, he found some Peigan hunting eagles for their feathers. That evening, Thompson camped with the Peigan and watched as they smoked and sang in honour of the eight eagles they had slain. The eagles were laid out on the grass with their heads toward the fire and the pipe was offered to each dead bird in turn. Often when an animal was killed, this type of offering was made to its spirit; and when an eagle feather or grizzly claw or weasel skin was worn, it was not just a decoration but a symbol of the power of the animal in which the wearer sought to share.

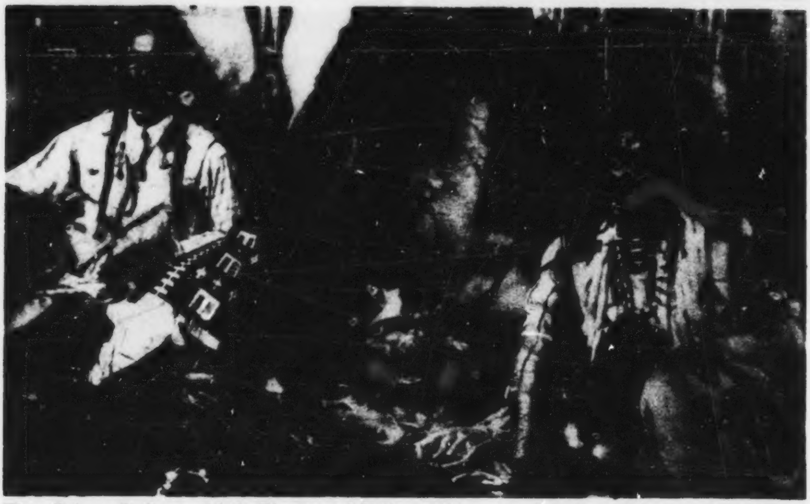
Young men on the threshold of manhood would go alone to a secluded place and fast for the sacred number of four days. This was a quest for vision, inspiration; and if the young man was granted his vision, he would be directed by it for life. Grown men sought vision in the same way and the designs on their tipis, the songs they sang, their conduct in war was often related back to these visions. Sacred objects based on a vision were

E. Curtis' photo of a sun lodge (Glenbow Archives).

kept in special bundles, and these, along with their songs and rituals were transferred from one person to another in a sacred ceremony.

The most important spiritual celebration in the Blackfoot year was the sun dance, a huge gathering held in mid-summer. An aspen tree was cut down and dragged to the site where it was erected as the centre of the medicine lodge. The lodge was round and covered in leafy aspen branches. The tipis of the people attending the celebration were erected in a broad circle with the medicine lodge at its centre. In the medicine lodge, spiritual ceremonies took place over several days.

The Peigan had more to do with Rocky Mountain House than any other tribe. Acton House and Rocky Mountain House were reopened in 1810, specifically for the Peigan trade. In the early months of 1811, the Peigan actually kept Rocky Mountain House from being destroyed by the Gros Ventre. However, despite saving the fort, the Peigan were never particularly happy with its location. It was too far north, which made travelling to it both inconvenient and dangerous. The Peigan and other Blackfoot alliance tribes repeatedly requested a fort nearer their hunting lands and the Hudson's Bay Company's refusal to build such a fort steadily eroded the goodwill between Indian and trader.



Two Peigan Indians, Little Plume and Yellow Kidney, in the place of honour opposite the main entrance of the lodge. Between them on the ground is a tobacco cutting board. Watch for this item in the Park museum (Glenbow Archives).

The Gros Ventre

The Gros Ventre (Atsina) were another people transplanted when the well-armed Cree and Assiniboine shifted west. The Gros Ventre used to live along the South Saskatchewan River, but under pressure from the Cree-Assiniboine alliance, they moved farther southwest to the Missouri River. The Gros Ventre were an offshoot of the Arapaho nation, another group of Algonkian speakers.

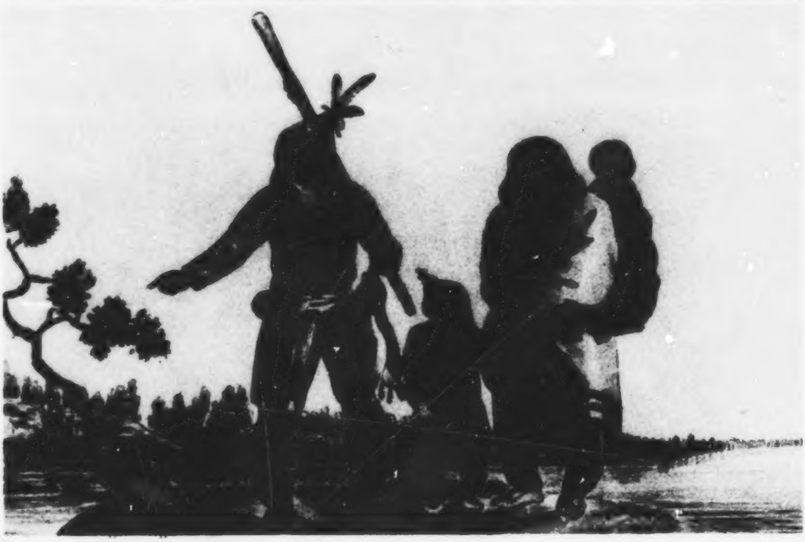
The fur traders were a bit frightened of the Gros Ventre because they were the only Plains tribe ever to attack a Saskatchewan River trade fort. Travelling along the Saskatchewan River, Alexander Henry came to the site of old Fort Brulé of which he wrote: "At this place, the H.B.C. people were plundered by Fall Indians (Gros Ventre), and narrowly escaped being murdered. The same attempt was made upon the N.W. Co., but by the intrepid behaviour of one of the clerks the Indians were repulsed and obliged to retire with the booty they had taken from the H.B. House." After this and another attack the following year, 1794, the Gros Ventre traded peaceably, usually at Rocky Mountain House when it was open. In 1811, they were reported about to attack Rocky Mountain House to obtain arms with which to defend themselves against their southern enemies, the Crow. When the Peigan sided with the traders at Rocky, the Gros Ventre were obliged to give up this plan.

Sarcee Indian camp, Okotoks, Alberta, 1926 (Glenbow Archives).

The Sarcee

To the first white men to come west, the Sarcee must have seemed an oddity. They were definitely allied to the Blackfoot, but spoke a language absolutely unlike Blackfoot or any other plains tongue. Their language eventually supplied the clue to their origin. Sarcee is an Athabaskan tongue, the kind spoken by the tribes of the far northwest. It helped to prove that the Sarcee were a break-away group of Beaver Indians. Sometime in the past they had migrated south and adopted a Plains Indian way of life.

Other than language, the Sarcee were very similar culturally to the Blackfoot. They held a sun dance and organized their society in much the same way. Alexander Henry always applauded the Sarcee for being more inclined to trap beaver than were the Blackfoot; but, to his chagrin, this ended when they moved from the north to the south side of the North Saskatchewan. This may have had something to do with the number of beaver available in the two places, but Henry put it down to a copying of Blackfoot indolence.



The Home Guard Indians were bands of Cree who lived close to the posts and were employed in hunting for the Company. This Cree hunter and his family were sketched at York Factory by P. Rindisbacher in 1821 (PAC C-1917).

The Cree and Assiniboine

The Assiniboine are an offshoot of the Sioux nation. Probably owing to some internal dispute, they broke away from the main body of Sioux and migrated northwest. The Cree, with whom the Assiniboine were allied, occupied so vast a territory it almost defies description. They originated in Northern Quebec, spread to the other side of Hudson Bay and were called the "Home Indians" by the Hudson's Bay Company whom they served as middlemen in the trade with practically all other Indian tribes.

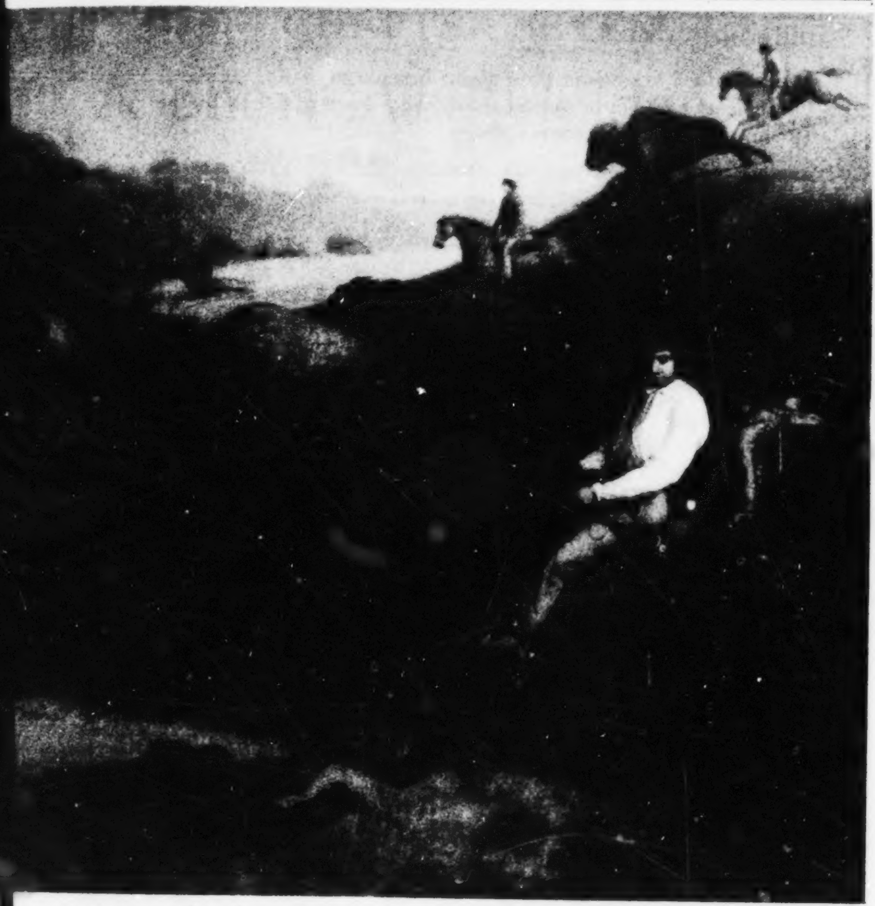
We know that the Cree traded at Rocky Mountain House as early as 1806 because David Thompson recalled a time in that year when the fort was visited by a band of Cree. Rain continued unabated for three weeks and the Indians became very nervous as the streams swelled and flood threatened. When the clouds finally broke, one of the Cree shouted, "There is the mark of life, we shall yet live!" He was pointing at a rainbow.

The Assiniboine were culturally quite similar to other Plains Indians, such as the Blackfoot. They used dogs to drag their travois. They drove buffalo into pounds. They fasted in search of vision. A military society of their best warriors policed their camps and regulated the buffalo hunt. The Assiniboine year revolved around the sun dance.

A Buffalo Rift, *A.J. Miller, 1867 (PAC C-403).*

Buffalo Pound, *Paul Kane (Royal Ontario Museum). Before the Indians had horses and guns, they killed buffalo by driving them into fenced pounds or over steep cliffs. With horses and guns, the Indians did this less often, preferring to chase buffalo in the open.*

The advent of the horse caused the same changes to the Assiniboine culture as it did to that of the Blackfoot. They went to war more often and at a greater distance. They largely gave up the buffalo pound in favour of running buffalo on horseback. To the fur traders, the Assiniboine were the most notorious horse-stealers among the Indian tribes. When the Assiniboine were trading at Rocky Mountain House, the fort was in turmoil: trying to guard the horses; trying to retrieve them when they had been stolen. To steal a well-guarded horse from an enemy was proof positive of a young man's valour and the practice supplied the most consistent excitement at the Saskatchewan forts.



Half Breeds Running Buffalo, *(Royal Ontario Museum). Paul Kane's depiction of Métis running buffalo gives a sense of the blood and thunder of such a chase — and the casualties on both sides.*

When Rocky Mountain House was open, the Hudson's Bay Company generally tried to keep the Cree and Assiniboine away from it. The company wanted those tribes to trade at Edmonton House while the Blackfoot alliance used Rocky Mountain House. Later, when the Blackfoot had deserted Rocky Mountain House for the whiskey forts on the Belly River, the Assiniboine who lived by the Mountain House were its only steady customers.

Smallpox

> We continued to advance through the fine plains to the Stag River when death came over us and swept away more than half by the smallpox of which we knew nothing.
>
> A Peigan elder as then
> told to David Thompson
> in the 1780s.

Four epidemics of smallpox killed an incredible number of Indian people on the western plains. In the 1730s, in 1781, in the late 1830s and again 1870-71, smallpox crossed the plains like a fire. Traders of the time guessed that over half the Indian population was killed in each epidemic. The lack of resistance to white man's disease was so profound that many Indians who were vaccinated against smallpox prior to 1837 caught the disease and died from it anyway. Nor was smallpox the only disease to kill Indians in great numbers. Typhoid, tuberculosis, influenza, scarlet fever: each had its terrible day on the plains. A measles epidemic in 1819-20 killed up to a third of all the Gros Ventre, Blood and Peigan trading at Rocky Mountain House.

David Thompson left some terrifying descriptions of the first and largest smallpox epidemic. He saw villages where the tents were filled with the putrefying dead. He heard of places where the men, driven mad by intolerable fever, had run into rivers and died there in droves. Thompson had the macabre distinction of being probably the only trader ever to conduct trade with the dead. He was told by some Woodland Indians that there were villages to the north that were filled with corpses covered in beaver robes. Thompson went to these ghost villages and replaced the beaver pelt shrouds with trade blankets. He dragged logs over the bodies to keep off the scavenging wolves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

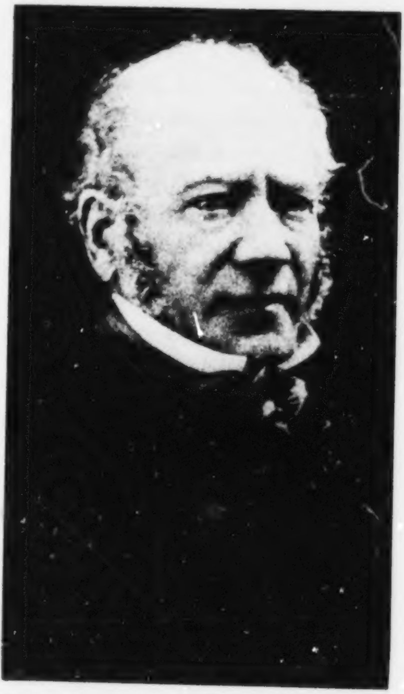
A Short-lived Golden Age

> You have no doubt long e'er this can reach you heard of the coalition of Interests which has taken place between rival companies in this Country, it was high time something of the kind took place for instead of gaining money we were beginning to lose considerable sums.
>
> A letter from one fur trader to another, J. G. McTavish
> to his brother Dugald, dated Aug. 27, 1821

After Coalition

In the fall of 1821, two forts stood on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan above its confluence with the Clearwater; two forts for one company, the newly amalgamated Hudson's Bay Company. This made no economic sense so one fort was abandoned; but which one? The decision was no doubt hard-nosed; based on space, location and which of the forts was in the best shape, and the evidence, such as it is, points to Rocky Mountain House. The residents of the old Rocky Mountain House shifted their goods over to Acton House and brought the name of their former home with them. Acton House disappears from most records and the fort was known, henceforth, as Rocky Mountain House.

The new Hudson's Bay Company had a new governor: George Simpson. Simpson was a relative newcomer who had made a name for himself in the Athabasca



George Simpson joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1820. He quickly ascended through the ranks and was appointed Governor of the Northern Department after amalgamation. By 1839, he was Governor over all of Rupert's Land (Hudson's Bay Archives).

District in the last few years of the fur war. Not many years after being a sugar broker's clerk in London, Simpson found himself governing the Hudson's Bay Company's vast Northern Department.

When Simpson looked over the books for the Saskatchewan District, of which Rocky Mountain House was part, he didn't care for what he saw. The Saskatchewan was overstaffed, depleted of beaver and losing 4000 pounds sterling a year. He decided to do something radical about it. He would close the entire North Saskatchewan operation, giving nature time to replenish itself, and would open up new posts for the Plains Indians on the South Saskatchewan.

Rumour had it that a great abundance of beaver existed along the southern rivers: the Red Deer, Belly and Bow. But Simpson was prudent enough that, before he made a move, he wanted an expedition to travel to the area and give him a full report.

This was the Bow River Expedition of 1822-23. It was led by Donald McKenzie, who brought the river brigade from York Factory (on Hudson Bay), while John Rowand brought the horse contingent from Edmonton House. In order to take part in the expedition, Rowand left Rocky Mountain House in the hands of a Métis clerk, Nicholas Montour. Montour's claim to fame was a duel he had fought in the Columbia District with an American named Pillet. It was pocket pistols at six paces and the report of the incident said that both men scored direct hits, one in the coat collar, one in the trouser leg. "A tailor speedily healed their wounds." Montour commanded Rocky Mountain House only for the summer of 1822. During the winter of 1822-23, Joseph Felix Laroque was in charge.

The Bow River Expedition was not a success. A fort was built below the forks of Red Deer and South Saskatchewan Rivers, and from it, three exploring missions set out. But not one of these sub-expeditions found beaver in any significant supply.

Informed of this the following spring, Simpson took a second look at his plans and decided that, depleted or not, the North Saskatchewan would have to stay open. In March of 1823, he wrote a letter to John Rowand who was now posted to Edmonton House and in charge of the Saskatchewan District, saying that "the Rocky Mountain House, being the favourite resort of the Peigan, who are our principal Fur Hunters, and the point from whence Freemen can be equipped to the best advantage, are good reasons for keeping it up as a permanent establishment." The ink was barely dry on that missive when Simpson changed his mind and wrote another to Donald McKenzie, saying that "under all circumstances it does not appear to me that the affairs of the Department are likely to suffer by the abandonment of the Rocky Mountain House, either in summer or winter, on the contrary, much expense saved.'' This was the final word and Rocky Mountain House was closed after the 1822-23 season.

John Rowand for one doubted it was a good idea. He feared the move would ''give the sulks to the Peigans,'' who might stop trading altogether. He also feared what would happen at Edmonton House if all the Indians started trading there. What the Peigan did surprised everyone. For the next two winters, they took their furs west of the Rockies and traded with the Hudson's Bay Company there, and to some extent with the Americans in the Snake River country. All Edmonton House received from them was a repeated request to reopen Rocky Mountain House.

The Glory Years

The longer the Peigan stayed away from Edmonton House, the more attractive the idea of reopening Rocky Mountain House became. Finally, Simpson gave Rowand the option of opening Rocky Mountain House as a temporary outpost which Rowand did in the winters of 1825-26 and 1826-27.

The fact that some Peigan furs were being lost to American traders west of the mountains became general knowledge in this period. George Simpson did a little arithmetic and deduced that the Americans coming from the west could never compete with Rocky Mountain House as long as the Indians were treated reasonably there. That Simpson was right was proven over the next few years by Rocky Mountain House's becoming a very lucrative post. Under the leadership of a clerk, Henry Fisher, a veteran of the Bow River Expedition, the fort thrived as never before throughout the late 1820s. What's more, the furs were coming from United States territory and from west of the mountains so that the Saskatchewan was able to become the most profitable district in the company at a time when the area was seriously depleted of beaver. Rocky Mountain House had a special place in this success as it was the fort which drew the all-important Peigan trade.

The American Threat and Peagan Post

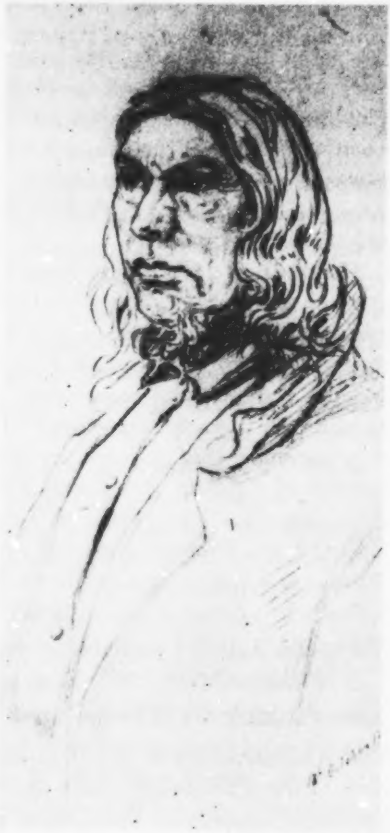
The Americans could not challenge the Hudson's Bay Company from west of the mountains; that was true. But, in 1828, the American Fur Company established Fort Union at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers; that is, *east* of the mountains. This in itself was not enough to break the Hudson's Bay Company hold on the Peigan trade. In the fall of 1829, according to a George Simpson committee report, the Peigan traded 2,000 beaver at Rocky Mountain House in one visit.

In the winter of 1830-31, the Peigan were bringing a similar quantity of beaver north to Rocky Mountain House when they were attacked by

Crow Mountain Indians. Fifty-seven Peigan were killed and all the furs were pillaged, most winding up in American hands. When the American Fur Company opened a new post, Fort Piegan, in 1831, in Peigan territory, it created grave problems for Rocky Mountain House. Why should the Peigan risk ambush to bring their furs to Rocky Mountain House, when they could take them a shorter distance through safer territory to Fort Piegan, receiving better prices to boot? The 1831-32 season at Rocky Mountain House was a disaster and, at the end of it, the post was closed.

When Governor George Simpson looked at the problem he decided there was still another reason for the Peigan's abandonment of Rocky Mountain House. He believed that a freeman by the name of Jimmy Jock Bird, who had recently severed his relationship with the Hudson's Bay Company, was stirring up the Indians against the company. A freeman was somebody who had left the company's service but had stayed in the West. Usually, freemen operated as middlemen, carrying on an independent trade with the Indians in their camps, then trading furs back to the company.

Jimmy Jock Bird was company officer James Bird's mixed blood son. He had begun with the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice in 1809, but had left it to adopt an Indian way of life among the Peigan. He had acquired significant influence with the Peigan, but was also receiving twenty pounds sterling a year as a retainer from the Hudson's Bay Company to bring his people to trade at Rocky Mountain House. This was the relationship he had recently broken



Jimmy Jock Bird, the mixed blood son of James Bird (HBC). Jimmy Jock lived with the Peigan and offended the Hudson's Bay Company by being more loyal to the Indian cause than he was to the company cause (Glenbow Archives).

off and Governor Simpson held him largely responsible for the Peigan's departure to the American side.

In the summer of 1832, two former managers of Rocky Mountain House, Henry Fisher and John Rowand, along with fifteen others, struck out south across the plains to try and win back the Peigan trade. At one point, Rowand and Jimmy Jock Bird met. Probably Rowand meant to resolve the situation with his fists, but Bird, wisely perhaps, took to his horse and fled. The result of the expedition was the building, that summer and fall, of Peagan Post on the Bow River. After so many years of fearing such a move, the Hudson's Bay Company was giving the Peigan the post in their hunting territory that they'd always asked for. Henry Fisher was left to build it and J. E. Harriott arrived a month later to run it.

Harriott had been in the fur trade for a long time. He was described by George Simpson as a "finished trader." "Speaks Cree like a native," wrote Simpson, "and is a great favourite with the Indians." But for all his skills, Harriott had little luck at Peagan Post. The fort was too little, too late. It was designed exclusively for the Peigan trade, but the American forts were still handier places for the Peigan to trade.

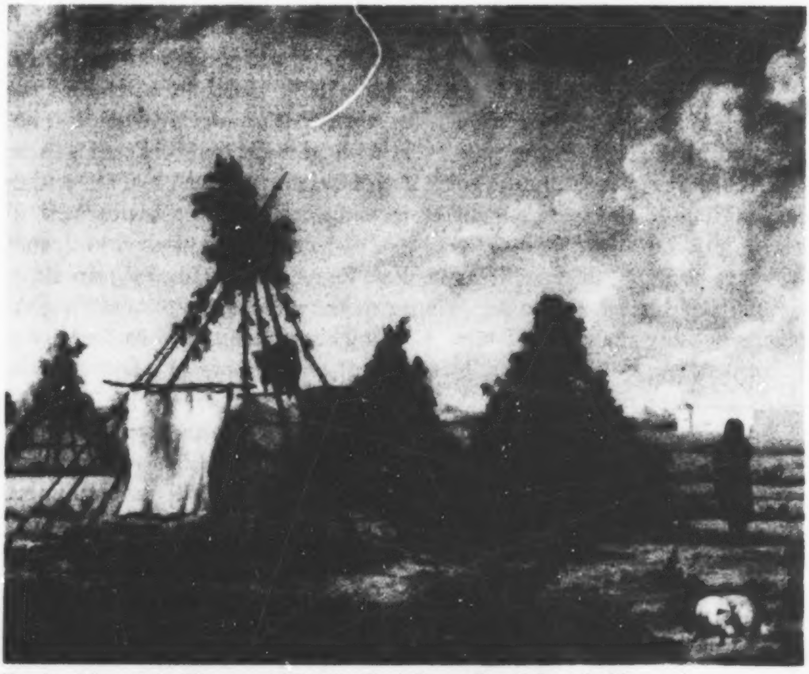
The Blackfoot, Blood and Sarcee were eager to trade at Peagan Post, but Harriott's orders were to deny them that privilege, sending them to Edmonton House instead. In January of 1833, Harriott was forced to abandon Peagan Post. He retreated to Rocky Mountain House which he operated for the rest of the season. His summation on the Peagan Post experience: "I never passed such a troublesome winter before in the Indian country and what is most distressing, nothing to show for it."

The Hudson's Bay Company hadn't had enough, however, and, the following summer, Harriott was back at Peagan Post. Jimmy Jock Bird (double agent or friend, no one seemed to know for sure) came to Peagan Post lamenting that he had tried to bring the Peigan in, but had been intercepted by the Americans. But the next Peigan hunt of beaver he felt would surely make its way to Peagan Post.

At the start of the second year, Harriott was again turning the Blackfoot and Blood away, but it was plain that this policy was driving a wedge into the Blackfoot alliance. Jealous of the special treatment the Peigan were receiving, the Blood especially were ready to go to war on their allies. In December, emissaries of Jimmy Jock Bird came in saying he was on his way with seventy tents of Peigan; but before they arrived, word did of a battle on the Breast River in which three Peigan camps had been routed by Blood Indians. The post journal report ends: "This affair will of course put an end to any Peigans, were they ever so much inclined, visiting this place for this season."

The year ended exactly as the previous one had, with a January retreat to Rocky Mountain House. In Harriott's words: "There being no advantage to be reaped by remaining at this place, but on the reverse, abundance of trouble and expense, I have determined on leaving it and retreating to the old Rocky Mountain House to secure the Trade of the Blood Indians where we shall be able to bring them more to our terms than at this place, and in the evening, everything being ready we took our leave of Peagan Post which we left to the mercy of the Circees, who lost no time in taking possession."

By January 20th, they were back at Rocky Mountain House, which they found "in very shattered condition." On January 21, all men were "employed putting in windows and hanging doors." Rocky Mountain House was back in business, as a permanent winter outpost of Edmonton House, trading with the Indians of the northern plains.



Rocky Mountain House, 1835-61, ***Paul Kane (Royal Ontario Museum).***

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stubbornly Staying Open (1835-61)

> We have passed a tolerable winter at the Rocky Mountain House in the way of living, plenty of buffalo, but our returns not so good as we expected on account of the slave indians went off to yankee side, they are spoilin our indians altogether, they get more for five robes there than we can give for fifteen here.
>
> Henry Finlayson,
> postmaster at Rocky Mountain House, 1857.

A New Fort

Nature was quick to tear Rocky Mountain House apart when the traders abandoned it. If you happen to arrive at the park when a good Chinook is blowing, you'll be able to appreciate why the buildings of the day couldn't stand up to the weather for long. In early 1835, J. E. Harriott wrote to Governor Simpson to let him know that he was building a new Rocky Mountain House, the old one being "entirely in ruins."

This 1835 Rocky Mountain House operated from that year forward as a wintering post, trading for fur and meat with the Indians of the northern plains. The Peigan trade had practically been given up on. The Americans had all the advantages now: they were running their goods in to the Missouri forts by river steamer and could afford to pay three times the price the Hudson's Bay Company could offer. The Hudson's Bay Company transport system, with its cumbersome York boats and its complicated supply routes, was a costly anachronism in the face of steam engine technology.

Rocky Mountain House was threatened with closure several times in these lean years but was always saved by the company's need for meat and pemmican or because the Blackfoot war with the Cree and Assiniboine was raging and Rocky Mountain House was the company's only device for keeping them apart. But perhaps the most important thing luring the Indians to the doors of the Mountain House was its gentlemanly Chief Trader, and later Chief Factor, J. E. Harriott. All who met Harriott commented on what a likable fellow he was. The redoubtable John Rowand, now Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District, though definitely not as genial, also had a large following among the Indians. The two together brought in a respectable trade.

The switch in Europe from the felt hat to the silk hat in the late 1830s, and the consequent decline in the demand for beaver ended a period of phenomenal prosperity for the Hudson's Bay Company as a whole, but at Rocky Mountain House it probably changed little. After 1840, the preferred article of trade was the buffalo robe, for sale in Eastern Canada, and Rocky Mountain House was still one of the best forts for the buffalo trade.

Increasing Violence

The Indians were being hurt by the fur trade. Any honest observer of conditions in the middle decades of the 18th century would have had to admit it. In the late 1830s, another smallpox epidemic began its terrible sweep over the West, and even hard-nosed John Rowand was heard to lament over the toll it took. By his estimate, three-quarters of the Indians died.

Then there was the liquor traffic. Liquor had been abandoned as destructive in most Hudson's Bay Company territory; but, on the plains, it still flowed freely. It was feared that if liquor was cut off there, the rest of the Plains Indian trade would move off to the Americans.

The price of continuing the liquor traffice was violence. The Saskatchewan forts had to keep large staffs for safety. In 1840, Rowand complained to his superiors that they would soon be hearing that he, at Edmonton, and J. E Harriott, at Rocky Mountain House, had been murdered for lack of decent trade goods. "Depend you will regret us but it will be too late." When Harriott arrived at Rocky in the fall of 1842, "there

Liquor produced terrible violence at Rocky Mountain House and all across the plains. Jerry Potts (above), the valuable North West Mounted Police guide, was orphaned by that violence in 1843 when his father was shot through the forehead while dealing rum out the loophole of an American fort on the Missouri (Glenbow Archives).

were crees, asiniboins and. . . Blackfeet,. . .all mixed together and not on the best of terms — they had been skirmishing and stealing each others horses during the Summer — I assure you when the Booze began I did not expect to see daylight with(out) some Bloodshed." In 1847, Harriott, standing in for Rowand as Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District, decided to keep Rocky Mountain House closed for the winter. "(The Blackfoot) have I think taken offence at something and they are trying to do all the mischief they can and then move off to the americans — under these circumstances I do not consider it safe to send people to the Rocky mountain. . .the only evil to be apprehended is their burning down the mountain house which if they are badly disposed toward us as I think they have done already."

The company's only consolation, a pale one, was that the Americans were hit even harder by the violence. In 1843, Andrew Potts, father of the famous North-West Mounted Police scout, Jerry Potts, was shot through the forehead while dealing rum out a loophole in an American fort on the Missouri.

It must have been clear to everyone that alcohol was at the root of the violence; creating a general havoc of war between tribes, within tribes, within the fur trade; and yet, the rum continued to pour. The Americans weren't about to stop selling it, so the Hudson's Bay Company continued to sell it too.

Things had certainly changed from Alexander Henry's day when the Blackfoot would not pay for "water." Now, rum constituted a major part of the trade for all goods.

Labour Strife on the Saskatchewan

In 1848, a fifteen-year-old from Montreal joined the Hudson's Bay Company and was sent to Rocky Mountain House to apprentice as a boat builder. Over half a century later, the same man, William Gladstone, sat down to reminisce about his life in the fur trade for the newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain Echo* (later, the *Pincher Creek Echo*), and so provided the only look at Rocky Mountain House from the working man's end of the telescope.

In 1848, Gladstone set out overland from Edmonton House on "an old plug of a horse that looked like a box of cutlery." When he arrived at Rocky, he found it "a forlorn looking place. It was not occupied in the summer and the grass was growing around it half the height of a man. We all got to work to cut the grass and tidy things up to be ready for the boats which we expected in about ten days."

That winter, Gladstone learned his trade of boat building from an Orkney man. Because of the slowness of trade at Rocky Mountain House, the fort had been given the added task of building a quota of York boats for the brigade. Full of the sap of youth, Gladstone didn't find Rocky Mountain House terribly exciting. He liked to read but there were no books to be had, so he learned Cree and "began visiting the women." Gladstone liked a drink, as most men in the fur trade did, and he was especially fond of New Year's Day, it being his birthday.

John Rowand (above) and J.E. Harriott dominated the affairs of Rocky Mountain House for over thirty years (Glenbow Archives).

Because Rocky Mountain House was closed for the summer, Gladstone and the other men went down to Edmonton House for that season, and were put to work making hay. There, Gladstone met John Rowand, whom he had not too fondly called "21 Shillings" or "One Pound One." The nickname derived from Rowand's gait. He had a stiff leg and "One Pound One" was the sound he made thumping around the Big House.

Rowand was getting on in years and he didn't care for the kind of young man who was of late entering the fur trade. He raged about "weak middlemen acting as bow and steersman, with a sett of small boys engaged at Montreal who cannot carry a piece. Why did Duplesis not engage the mothers as well as the boys? To take the latter from their mother's breasts so young is a great sin."

William Gladstone may have been one of the Montreal boys to whom Rowand referred. He certainly felt the lash of Rowand's tongue that spring. "One Pound One kept us all on the jump. He was one of the most fluent swearers I ever met. I avoided him during his periods of verbal eruptions as carefully as if he had been a volcano on duty."

Gladstone must have found it an incredible switch when he went back to Rocky Mountain House and started work for J. E. Harriott. Harriott impressed Gladstone from the first. The men were expected to doff their hats when they met a Chief Factor, but Harriott "always lifted his own and passed the time of day." Harriott was a devoted reader and when he found out that Gladstone shared his taste, he invited the young carpenter in to see his library. Gladstone couldn't believe his eyes: a library of 200 books! Harriott was more than willing to let his employee borrow them.

Rowand's style of management, on the other hand, led to labour unrest in the winter of 1852-53. Gladstone was working in the Edmonton House boatyard and took an active part. The men demanded a pound of tea per month, and complained of the fact that they had to buy horses which were used for company business. The company quickly redressed both grievances. Rowand was livid, but his fellow traders thought he had brought it on himself. The flour and tea ration extended to Rocky Mountain House and Gladstone was still enjoying it the following winter.

The Saskatchewan District lost its quiet Mr. Harriott and its violent Mr. Rowand within a year. It seems that Harriott was drinking too deeply of his own trade goods, and he left the Saskatchewan for Red River in 1853. John Rowand decided to retire in 1854, and boarded that spring's brigade for the East. At one of the first stops, Fort Pitt, a fight broke out between two labourers. Rowand strode in between the men, cursing and flailing at them. With his arm cocked to deliver a blow, he dropped down dead. William Gladstone's version of the event was that One Pound One had "got as far as Ft. Pitt when he kicked the bucket. I think the death gave more genuine pleasure to us than anything he could have done."

Whatever the men thought, the Hudson's Bay Company had lost one of its most valuable and knowledgeable traders. The company probably had cause to rue their decision to retire Harriott as well. Drinking or not, Harriott was the magnet that drew the Indians to Rocky Mountain House. Without him, the Indians would not go there. The logical thing to do would have been to close Rocky and open a post on the plains closer to the Indians' hunting territory; but the company was haunted by its failure at Peagan Post, and was afraid for the safety of any post farther south. Rocky Mountain House was allowed to stay open for several more unproductive years.

Fire

The violence of the '40s and '50s actually burst into flames on many occasions. One Indian technique for evading an enemy was to set the prairie on fire. Men standing night guard on the gallery at Rocky Mountain House could see the glow above the trees, and at Edmonton House they could actually see the flames licking the darkness south of the river. Harriott had always feared that he would arrive at Rocky Mountain House one fall to find it in ashes.

But, the old fort was still standing in 1853 when J. E. Harriott left, and it was still standing in 1854 when Henry Moberly, a Torontonian, arrived to take charge.

It has to be a reflection of Rocky Mountain House's declining importance that Moberly, a youngster who had been in the fur trade exactly ten months, was given this responsibility. He probably flattered himself when he wrote: "Here was I, the youngest clerk in the district, in charge of one of the most important and, at that time, certainly one of the most hazardous posts in the country." William Gladstone's assessment of Moberly was that, "poor fellow, his heart was in the right place but his stomach weak and eastern."

There was nothing wrong with Moberly's fists, however. When faced with a mutineer from one of the brigades, Moberly did lengthy battle with the man and knocked him out. Another time, he took several Red River carts south from Rocky Mountain House to trade for provisions with the Sarcee and Blackfoot. Everything was going nicely when a war party arrived, demanding rum on credit. Moberly refused and was threatened by a knife which actually touched his nose. Moberly struck his assailant, knocking him down twice. Then his interpreter, Piskun Munroe, possibly fearing that his employer's fistic prowess was going to get them all killed, pulled his gun and held it to Chief Old Swan's head. This didn't exactly bestow peace either and things looked very dangerous until Chief Old Swan himself, ignoring the gun at his head, blithely knocked the ash from his pipe, stood, and told everyone to go home. They did.

When William Gladstone signed back on with the Hudson's Bay Company in the late '50s and was reassigned to Rocky Mountain House, Henry Moberly was long gone. Several bosses had come and gone since, and they continued to come and go in brisk fashion. Rocky Mountain House was no longer ruled by Chief Factors or Chief Traders. Usually clerks were left in charge or even the more lowly postmaster.

The problem in these years was food. Far from bringing a surplus of provisions, the Indians were bringing no provisions at all, and the people of the fort were going hungry. "No grub," Gladstone lamented. "Not a redskin turned up with meat." One of the key reasons for this was that, after all these years, the company had decided to stop trading liquor on the plains. The Indians were angry about it, and had decided not to feed the forts in retaliation. They were also preventing the fort's hunters from making any kills. For Gladstone, the drinking prohibition was hard law. "A dance without the usual gallon was a pitiful mockery."

Rocky Mountain House was again in such pitiful shape that it provided no real protection to its inmates. It was extensively rebuilt in 1860, but, in the following winter, the food situation became intolerable. Gladstone said that after New Year's Day there was no meat because the Belly River Indians had gone to Fort Benton for rum. Joseph Brazeau was the clerk in charge at Rocky Mountain House and by the first of March, 1861, he'd had enough. He packed up and headed for Edmonton House. William Gladstone did not go. Not satisfied with the number of boats he'd built so far that winter (five), he persuaded Brazeau to give him enough meat to see him through until he'd met his quota.

On May 6th, Gladstone brought his boats out, for the last time as it turned out. No men were sent to Rocky Mountain House that fall, and when the Blackfoot arrived and found the fort empty, they did what so many had feared they would do. They burned Rocky Mountain House to the ground.

A year later, William Gladstone left the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, this time for good. Perhaps the sight of gold prospectors passing him by at Rocky Mountain House had finally been too great a temptation, for he took his family to Montana. "Old Glad," as he was known to his friends long before he was old, had many unique experiences in his

Titans of the Saskatchewan: J. E. Harriott and John Rowand

It is hard to think of two more different men than J. E. Harriott and John Rowand. Nothing perhaps distinguishes them more than their ideas of entertainment. Harriott liked to sit back in his rooms at Rocky Mountain House sampling of his large library. Rowand preferred to watch a good horse race or fist fight. Many visitors to Edmonton House commented on the size and quality of John Rowand's personal herd of horses and when it came to fighters, he was no less particular. William Gladstone described a time in York Factory when a battle of brigade bullies took place. Rowand "yelled with glee every time (his) man got in a good punch," and "fairly whooped with joy" when the Rainy River bully went down for the last time. It is ironic that Rowand would die separating a pair of combatants.

In spite of all their differences, Harriott and Rowand were friends. They had the Saskatchewan in common for one thing, being its grand old men for many years, and their families were also connected by marriage several times over.

John Rowand's wife was Louise Umfreville. Some time before 1820, at Edmonton House, Rowand had ridden off alone and been thrown by his horse, breaking a leg. He probably would have perished except for Louise Umfreville. She alone noticed both his absence and which way he'd gone. The story has it that she found him, nursed him back to health and, so doing, won her way into his tough heart. They had several children.

J. E. Harriott's first wife was Elizabeth Pruden, the mixed-blood daughter of John Peter Pruden who had been the manager of Acton House from 1805-1807. There was no man of the cloth to marry them, but Pruden made Harriott swear to abide by his daughter for life. Sadly, that proved to be a not very long period of time. George Simpson once mentioned in a letter that Elizabeth was "raging mad" and, when Harriott and family were accompanying the Columbia brigade through the Athabasca Pass in the spring of 1830, Elizabeth walked off into the night and was never seen again. She left her newborn daughter behind and, managing to save the child from the cold, Harriott left her with Louise and John Rowand at Edmonton House.

By 1838, Harriott was tired of the widower's life at Rocky Mountain House. He married John Rowand's daughter, Nancy, who was seventeen at the time. In 1848, the families inter-married again. This time, Harriott's daughter, Margaret, (saved the night of her mother's disappearance) married the Rowands' son, John.

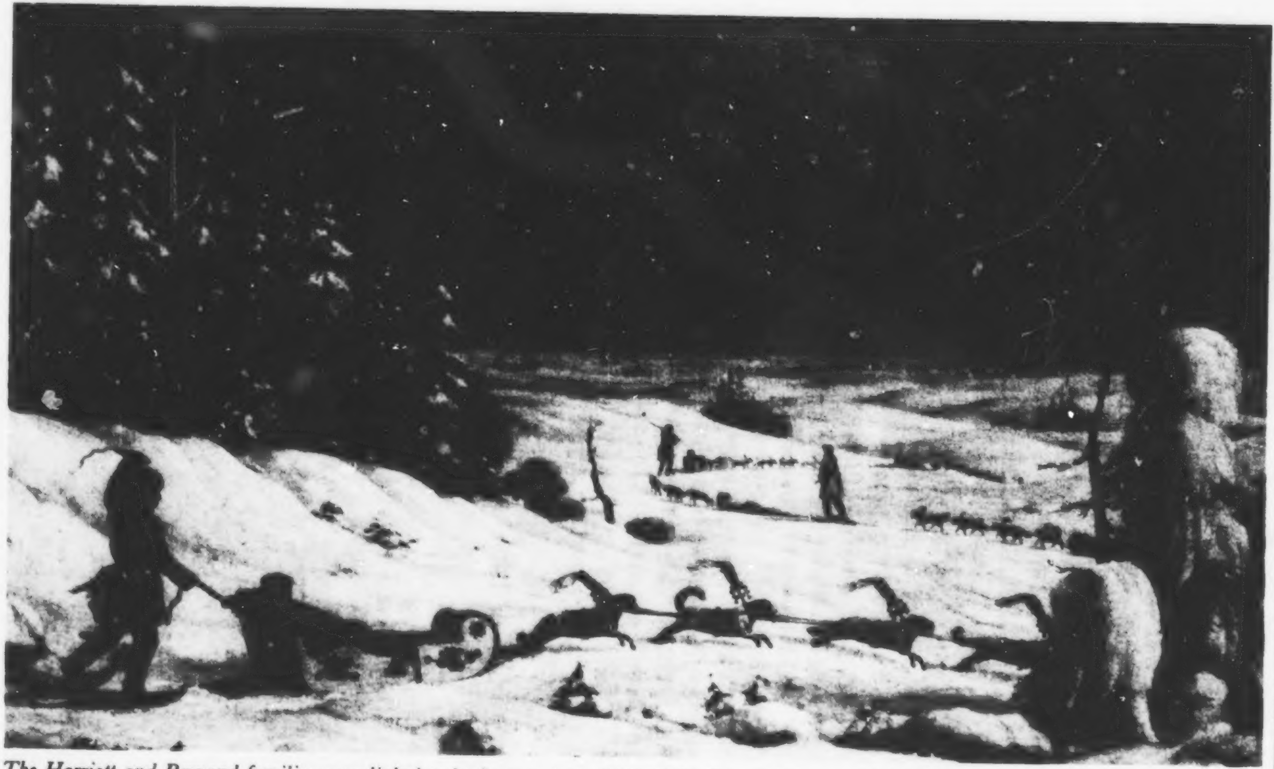
It was not long after this that both Nancy Harriott and John Rowand's Louise died. Louise was buried under the name Umfreville rather than Rowand and, informing one of their children of the death, John Rowand used the ambiguous phrase: "The mother of all my children is no more." Rowand himself died on his way to retirement in 1854.

After the death of his second wife, J. E. Harriott's drinking problem got out of hand. The man who had so often been praised for his steadiness was sent from the Saskatchewan District to Red River because of "intemperate habits." He was officially retired in 1855. He lived for several more years and his home in Red River was described in an 1861 Harper's article about the settlement. The Harriott home was still well stocked with books.

life. He is almost certainly the only man to have applied his carpentry skills to building both a pioneer mission and a whiskey fort. Gladstone built the Smokey Lake mission for Reverend Thomas Woolsey in 1862 and, a few years later, he built Fort Whoop-up, near modern day Lethbridge, for the American whiskey traders.

"Old Glad" lived out his days in the mountains south of Pincher Creek, and many of his descendents live in that part of the country today.

William Gladstone apprenticed as a boatbuilder at Rocky Mountain House in the late 1840s (Parks Canada).



The Harriott and Rowand families were linked twice by marriage. When John Rowand Jr. married Margaret Harriott, Paul Kane painted this picture of their chilly honeymoon voyage back to Fort Pitt (Royal Ontario Museum).

CHAPTER NINE

Visiting Dignitaries

It was early morn, but up went the flag, and the little metropolis was all excitement in consequence of our arrival. The Chief Factor in those days was supreme in his own district. . .No wonder the. . .fort was *en fête* when such ecclesiastical and commercial dignity came suddenly upon it.

John McDougall, on his arrival at Rocky Mountain House
in company with his father and Chief Factor William Christie, 1865.

Celebrity

In this age of satellites and space shuttles, when we see umpteen celebrities on our televisions every night, a celebrity in the flesh still draws a crowd. What must it have been like then when a polished outsider descended on an isolated outpost like Rocky Mountain House?

Before 1840, the denizens of the fort had no visitors at all who weren't related to the fur trade. And, after that, only a handful of grand foreigners arrived. The coming of a missionary or an explorer or an aristocratic adventurer stirred up a sudden celebration. The closed society of the fur trade opened a crack and, for a short while, a new source of information, a symbol of other, broader worlds stepped in. There were no red carpets to roll out, but a visiting dignitary could count on the flag going up, a salvo from the fort's guns and a very curious crowd on the river bank to receive him.

Missionaries

The Hudson's Bay Company wasn't certain it wanted missionaries as far west as Rocky Mountain House. They might divert the Indians from their hunting labours, or have something to say about the way business was done. On the other hand, if the company stood in religion's path, it would look cynical to the world. Finally, the ever-cagey George Simpson invited some Protestant missionaries into the Saskatchewan. Catholic missionaries were seen as emissaries of France and threats to the English company. Simpson was hoping to give English Protestantism an edge.

So it was that a young Methodist, Robert Terrill Rundle, arrived at Edmonton House in 1840. John Rowand wasn't enthusiastic. He made Rundle comfortable and even confessed to like him, but he also did what he could to discourage the young missionary. J. E. Harriott at Rocky Mountain House had no such qualms. He told Rundle there were Cree Indians in his quarter anxious to meet him.

Top left: John Palliser (Glenbow Archives).

Top right: James Hector, geologist (Glenbow Archives).

Bottom left: Paul Kane, artist (Glenbow Archives).

Some of this anxiousness, it turns out, was based on a misconception. In a letter to Governor Simpson, Rowand said that the Blackfoot were expecting Rundle to open a trading shop. "When told by Mr. Harriott that he had nothing to give them but good words, they were disappointed, and said they expected better things of him."

Rev. Robert T. Rundle, Methodist Missionary (Glenbow Archives).

The missionary task was large and difficult and some felt that Rundle was not dignified enough to handle it. It is a credit to Rundle's personal warmth and his energy that he achieved so much real progress for his church. His first trip to Rocky Mountain House took place in 1841, and he met several Blood and Blackfoot there. Some gave him their left hands to shake, that being the closest to the heart, and when he responded in kind, they were pleased. Rundle heard a story among them that he had "come down from heaven in a bit of paper which was opened by one of the Co's gentlemen. . .& lo!!! I came out." In the years to come, Rundle visited Rocky Mountain House many times, always finding Harriott a staunch ally. Harriott lent his fluency in Cree to Rundle's cause, translating many prayers.

For Rundle, June 22, 1842, was the blackest of days. "Reached the Fort early in the morning and found a Popish priest there. My feelings can be better imagined than described. Prayers in the morning but found the Priest had made an almost dead sweep except for the English."

The priest was Father Jean-Baptiste Thibeault of Quebec and he swiftly won over most of the people of French descent. Even the Métis, many of whom had never seen a priest or a mass performed, knew Catholicism to be the religion of their forefathers; and, given the choice, they traded Rundle's Protestantism for it.

Rowand wrote to Simpson: "Perhaps you will not like to hear that Rev. Thybeault is in this quarter. . . The fort is not the place to keep ministers who are never pleased except when the Fort is full of Indians doing nothing for the Company or themselves except learning to sing salms (sic)."

Rowand was fairly indifferent to the war for souls; not so J. E. Harriott. Harriott was a staunch Protestant and he used his considerable influence to keep the Indians of Rocky Mountain House on Rundle's side of the ecclesiastical fence. Rocky Mountain House was more or less off-limits to priests until Father Pierre de Smet, a Belgian Jesuit, arrived there from across the mountains in 1845. De Smet was hoping to end the war between the Blackfoot and his Flathead Indian parishioners at Kalispell. Rundle was at Rocky Mountain House at the time, but the predictable conflict did not occur. To Rundle's amazement, he and the priest got along well. Summing up their relationship, he wrote: "Perhaps a Roman Catholic Priest and a Wesleyan Missionary never before parted on such good terms."

Robert T. Rundle left the West for England in 1848, and Rocky Mountain House was on his mind to the last. On route to York Factory, he wrote back to an assistant recommending that he visit the Mountain House when the Indians were there to trade. "Give them a little tobacoo. I shake hands with all of them who come in for prayers."

In fact, it was nine years before another Methodist, Reverend Thomas Woolsey, set foot in Rocky Mountain House. Woolsey first arrived on October 30, 1857, and William Gladstone, the boat-builder, was very glad he did, although not for any especially religious reason. Thanks to the minister, the men were given a holiday every Sunday until eight in the evening.

Father Lacombe, an Oblate priest from Quebec, came West in the same brigade canoe as Woolsey, and he also came to Rocky Mountain House after a time. William Gladstone recalled one particularly stormy visit from Father Lacombe. The priest showed up shortly after an Indian had been killed there. The murder was an ugly, bloody business. A Cree war party had been at the post when several Blackfoot arrived wanting to trade. To keep the enemy tribesmen apart, the traders locked the Cree in one of the bastions. Trade commenced and went smoothly; but, when the Blackfoot were leaving, one of them stole a horse. Someone at the fort got the bright idea of using the Cree to punish the offence. The Cree were loosed from the bastion and they caught a Blackfoot straggler in the deep snow across the river. The man was scalped, his body chopped up, and the pieces hung in the tree.

When Father Lacombe arrived to find that nothing had been done with the corpse, he lost his temper. The men followed the angry priest across the river to help gather the remains and give them a decent burial.

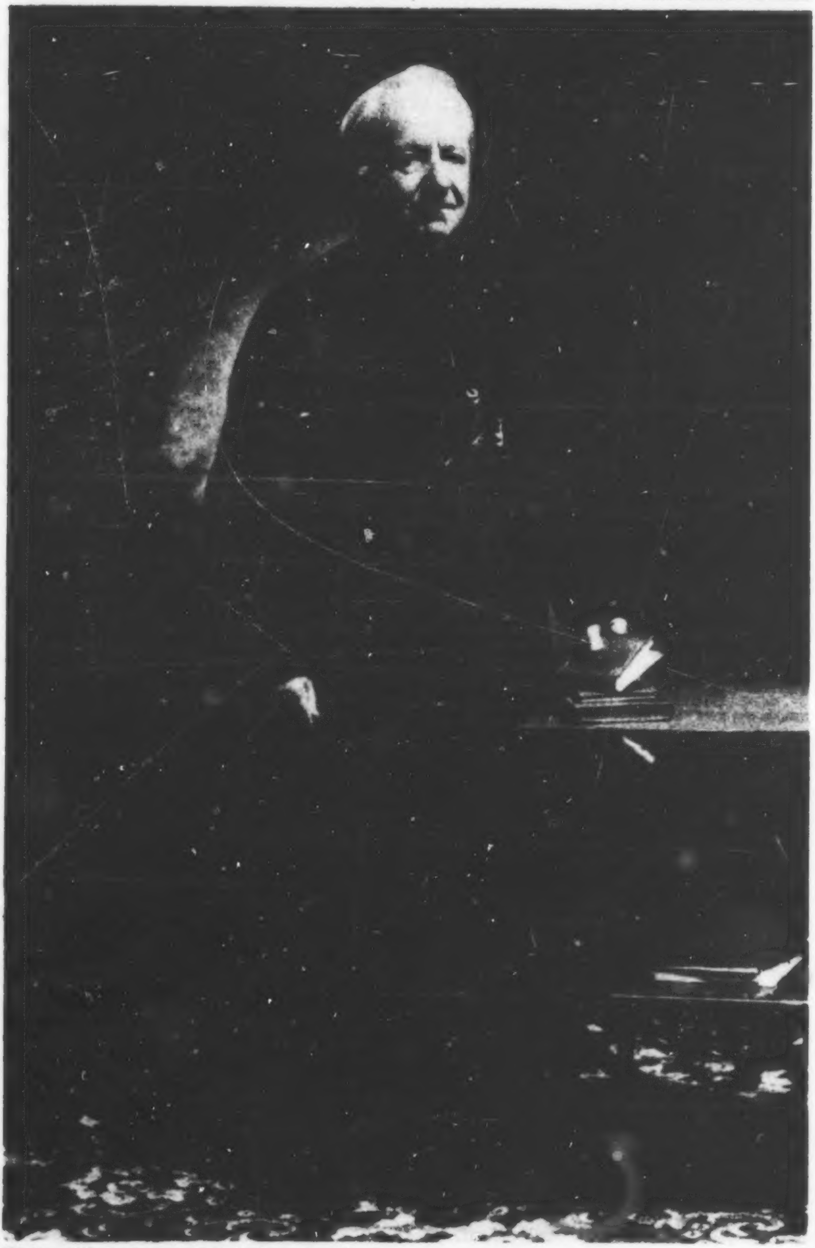
The battle between the faiths went on unabated through this period. One anecdotalist described the struggle for souls this way: "Priest (Father

Lacombe) catches a convert and baptizes him. Woolsey hears of it and baptizes him over again and so on ad infinitum, it being with great difficulty that convert knows whether he was made Papist or Protestant last."

A comment recorded by Thomas Woolsey during his first visit to Rocky Mountain House in 1857 has been of great help in selecting which fort sites at Rocky Mountain House belonged to the period 1835-61. Woolsey wrote that the fort he visited was "somewhat quadrangular." As only one of the forts sites was irregular in shape the historians could assign it to this period with great certainty. Woolsey also described the burial ground at Rocky Mountain House. He called it a "city of the dead," the largest he had ever seen. "Some few of the graves had rudely constructed pickets around them; but with one exception (that of a highlander) there is no intimation as to whose mortal remains are there."

When Thomas Woolsey left the plains for Canada in 1864, the Methodist cause was taken up by the McDougalls: George Millward McDougall and his son, John. Though they visited Rocky Mountain House seldom, John McDougall and his brother, David, helped ring the death knell of the old mountain fort in 1874. The fact that they were operating in safety on the Bow River contributed to the Bay Company's decision to close Rocky Mountain House and open a post farther south.

Father Albert Lacombe probably had more to do with Rocky Mountain House than any other Catholic priest. In 1864, during a scarlet fever epidemic, he went there to help the sick and dying. Richard Hardisty, the Chief Trader at Rocky at the time, was probably grateful for this and, a year later, when Lacombe was wounded in a crossfire between Cree and Blackfoot, he had a chance to repay the favour. Lacombe wrote: "Richard Hardisty treated me like a brother that day. I felt so sick and tired and hungry when I got to Rocky Mountain House that I was ready to lie down on the snow and die. But he took our miserable party in before his big fire, and warmed and fed us and clothed me, and I always feel since that day that he saved my life." In 1870, Father Lacombe and another priest, Constantine Scollen, sought the peace and quiet of Rocky Mountain House to turn Lacombe's voluminous notes into the first comprehensive Cree dictionary.



Father Albert Lacombe (Glenbow Archives).

Father Constantine Scollen and Father Albert Lacombe worked at Rocky Mountain House on the first Cree Dictionary (Parks Canada).

Father Constantin Scollen (Glenbow Archives).

Paul Kane

Artist Paul Kane was a visitor to Rocky Mountain House in 1848. After four years of art training in Europe, the young Torontonian decided he would like to paint the wild scenery and people of the West. He found Governor George Simpson quite open to the idea. Simpson not only arranged a place for Kane on the Inland Brigade, he also commissioned twelve paintings.

Toward the end of his voyage, Kane was wintering at Edmonton House and decided to make a side trip to Rocky Mountain House. Kane saw nothing outstanding about the fort, perhaps because his visit coincided with the only winter Rocky Mountain House was closed in the 1835-61 period. He did mention that the fort was built "with more than ordinary strength" because of the Blackfoot. Kane was more interested in the Assiniboine who were camped nearby. He found them friendly and painted portraits of two of their chiefs. One was so impressed he gave Kane a necklace of grizzly bear claws he had been wearing for twenty-three summers. Kane also painted Rocky Mountain House, albeit as background for another subject. It is one of the few images of the fort that has survived.

While at Rocky Mountain House, Paul Kane struck up a friendship with Jimmy Jock Bird, who, with his family, was the sole resident of the fort. Kane found that he quite liked the infamous Bird and he could not understand how the freeman had earned such a terrible reputation with the traders and missionaries. In fact, Kane doubted that there was anyone who was a better source of information on the Blackfoot. When food ran out at Rocky Mountain House, Paul Kane and Jimmy Jock Bird made a dash for Edmonton House, counting on a cache of dried meat Bird claimed to have along the way. They located the place where the meat had been, but a wolverine had wiggled in between the logs and emptied it. This made for an even hastier, hungrier trip.

A plaque at Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park, near the site of the fort he visited, commemorates Paul Kane's epic voyage across the continent *and* his stopover at the mountain fort.

Explorers

When Britain, and later Canada, began to contemplate settling the north-west portion of North America, their first move was to explore the region to see if it could sustain a civilian population. In 1857, Captain John Palliser and a select party of scientists set out on behalf of Britain to study the territory from Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains; and also to

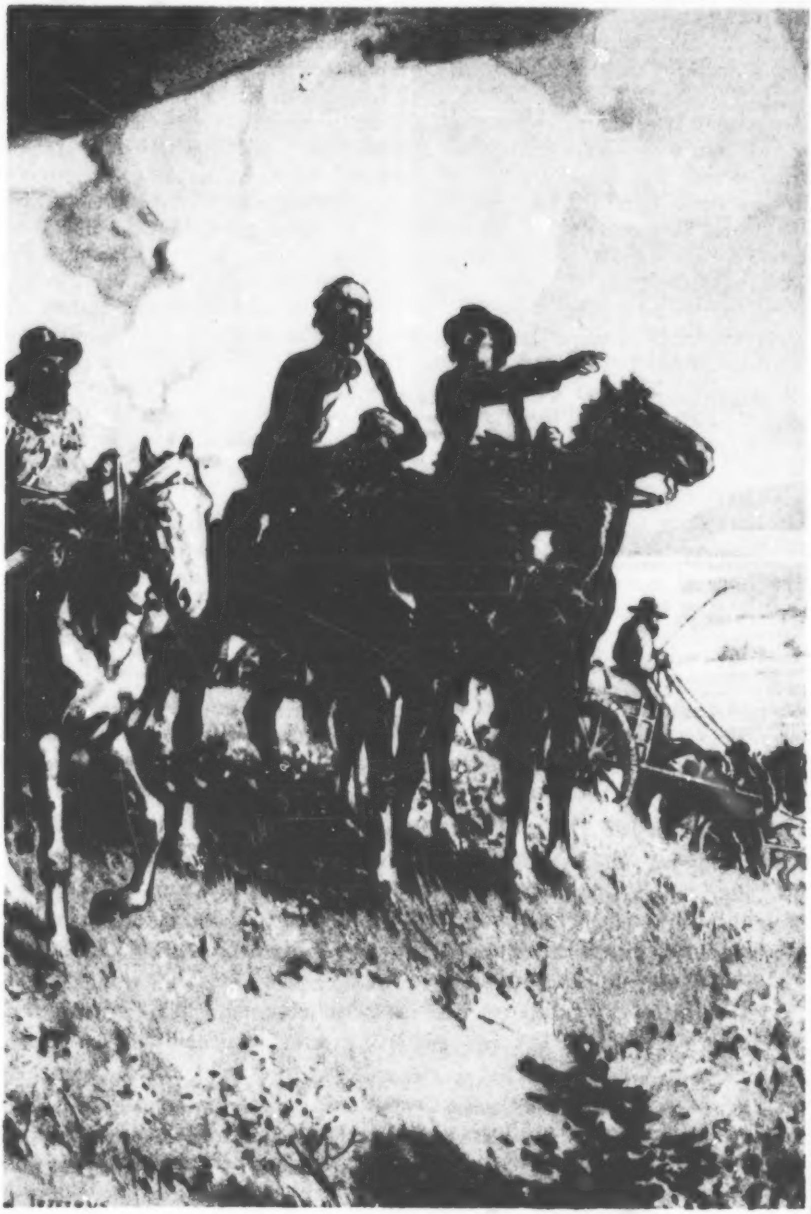
Paul Kane left most of the visual images we have of the fur trade at Rocky Mountain House (Royal Ontario Museum).

Mah-Min or "The Feather" Assiniboin chief, sketched at Rocky Mountain House by Paul Kane (Stark Foundation, Orange, Texas).

look for practical passes through the mountains. They were to comment on all aspects of the land, from natural resources to agricultural potential.

James Hector was the first member of Palliser's expedition to reach Rocky Mountain House, in January, 1858. Like many before him, Hector's main impression of the fort was that "the whole place (was) falling to pieces." Being a geologist, Hector was most interested in the lay of the land. He described the larch and spruce muskegs north of the fort, and found in the trees farther north a second terrace like the one on which the fort stood. He noted several kinds of mostly sedimentary stone that made up the geological landscape.

Hector also had cause to note the "riot and disorder" among the Blackfoot when Joseph Brazeau, the post master, returned with a stock of watered rum. One chief stood on the gallery of the stockade and lectured the unruly Indians on the "necessity of their good behaviour, reminding them that they get nothing but good at our hands, and not to confound us with the 'Big Knives,' as they term the Americans, who, he said, do not treat them well, but are deceitful." Hector spoke to the chiefs and got from them assurances that the expedition could travel the western plains and mountain passes in peace.



Captain John Palliser, left, and Sir James Hector exploring the West. Illustration by C. W. Jefferys (Imperial Oil Collection).

On Hector's next visit to Rocky Mountain House, he arrived from the West, having explored the Bow River and the interior passes to the North Saskatchewan. It was September, 1858, when he arrived at Rocky Mountain House and the fort was deserted. He took up residence in the kitchen, pulling off rotten pickets for his fire, but he felt uncomfortable. It turned wintery in the night and he set off in the snow the next day for Edmonton House.

Most of the expedition members assembled at Edmonton House for the Christmas celebration. Then, for John Palliser, it was off to Rocky Mountain House for more discussions with the Blackfoot. He took with him the only two wealthy hunter-adventurers ever to visit the mountain fort: Captain Brisco and Mr. William Roland Mitchell. Joseph Brazeau, in charge again, was having a rough winter and was delighted to see them. The visitors may have been celebrities to the people of the fort, but, for them, the local celebrity was Brazeau. They were very taken with his tales of adventure and also his grasp of Indian languages: he spoke six, as well as Spanish, English and French.

Another visitor to reach Rocky Mountain House was Captain William Francis Butler. In 1869, Butler had been given the ticklish job of travelling to Red River to spy on Louis Riel's rebel Métis government. After Colonel Garnet Wolseley and his army ousted Riel, Butler was given another commission, this one from the Canadian government, to investigate the whiskey forts and general lawlessness of the West.

When Butler swam his horse across the North Saskatchewan to Rocky Mountain House, he declared his "ride to the West" completed. "Exactly 41 days earlier I had left Red River, and in 27 days of actual travel I had ridden 1180 miles." Of the violence he came to observe, Butler certainly heard a good deal at Rocky Mountain House, and he left a valuable description of the cautious trade procedure at the fort in 1870. When Butler's commission was completed, he recommended to the Canadian government the establishment of a well-equipped force of men to police the West. This was one of the influences leading to the creation of the North-West Mounted Police in 1874.

Captain William Francis Butler (Glenbow Archives).

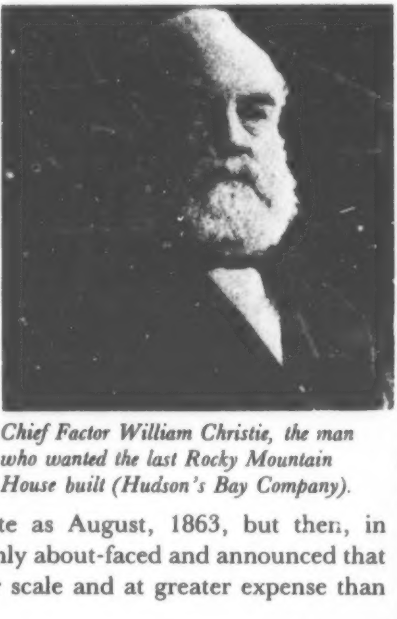
CHAPTER TEN

The Last Best Fort

The fort and trading post had been abandoned by the Hudson's Bay Company for some years, but in the summer of 1864 it was decided to reopen it in order to draw the trade of the surrounding Indian tribes — Blackfoot and Bloods, Peigans and Sarcees — and also to keep these turbulent tribes as much as possible from collision with the wood and plains Crees, their hereditary foes.

John McDougall

Good Riddance



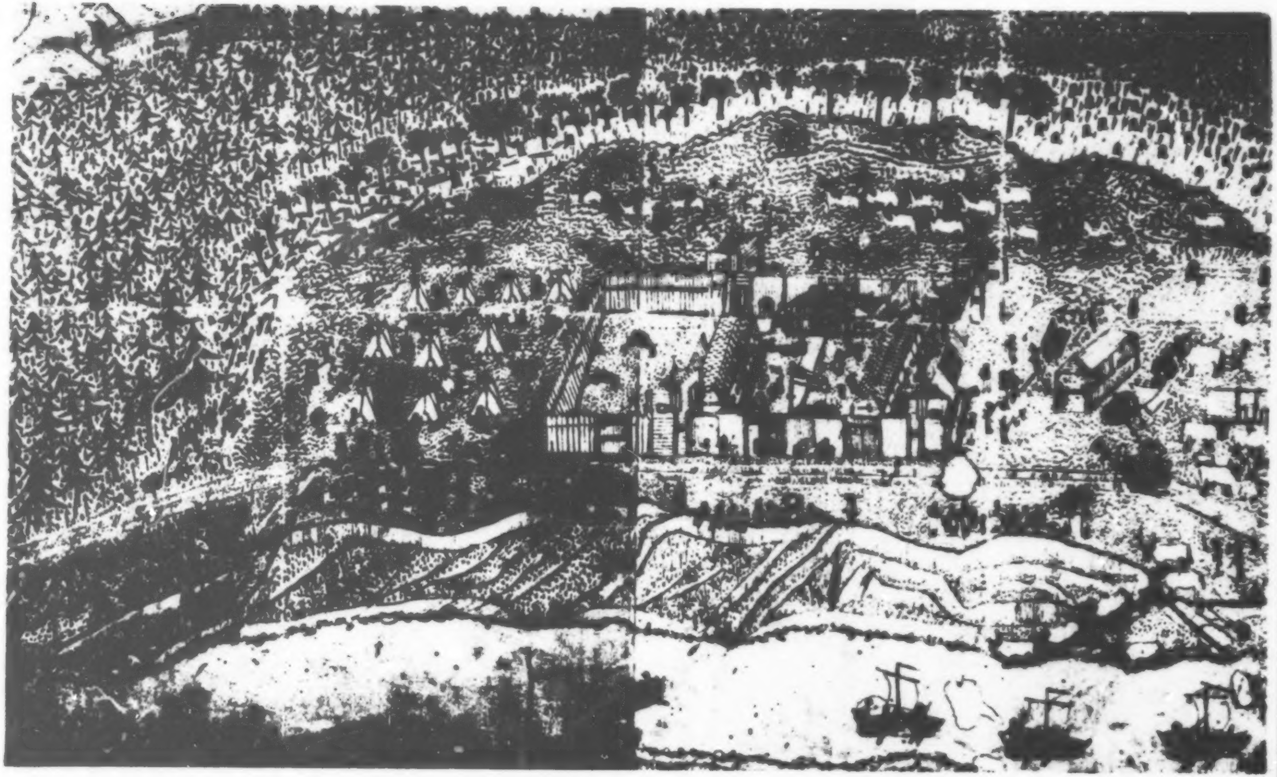
Chief Factor William Christie, the man who wanted the last Rocky Mountain House built (Hudson's Bay Company).

Put yourself for a moment in the position of William Christie, the new Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District. Rocky Mountain House had been burned to the ground by the Blackfoot in the fall of 1861. Prior to that it was a losing concern that couldn't feed itself. Meanwhile, the Blackfoot were becoming so violent it was almost impossible to carry on a profitable trade with them. Most of us, in Christie's shoes, would have bidden the old Mountain fort good riddance and left it a charred ruin.

Christie did hold this view as late as August, 1863, but then, in December of the same year, he suddenly about-faced and announced that he would rebuild the fort on a larger scale and at greater expense than ever before.

What had caused this change of mind was a development south of the border, in the Montana gold fields. American traders were finding they could make more money selling their goods to prospectors than they could trading them to Indians for furs. Christie believed that, "as the Indians find their treatment altered, they will in all probability be driven up this way and trade with us, in this case and for other reasons, it will be absolutely necessary for us to re-establish Rocky Mountain House."

The "other reasons" were the ferocious fights going on between the Blackfoot and the Cree and Assiniboine at Edmonton House. As the



Rocky Mountain House, 1873, sketched by Jean L'Hereux (Glenbow Archives).

Indians came and went, they were often ambushed and pillaged, which produced a natural reluctance to come near the fort at all. Christie was hoping that a new Rocky Mountain House would draw the Blackfoot alliance trade, leaving Edmonton House at peace. Christie was very optimistic. "With a good Manager I feel confident the Post will turn out good Returns (as) it used to do in Mr. Harriott's time, and could do so again."

The Temporary Fort

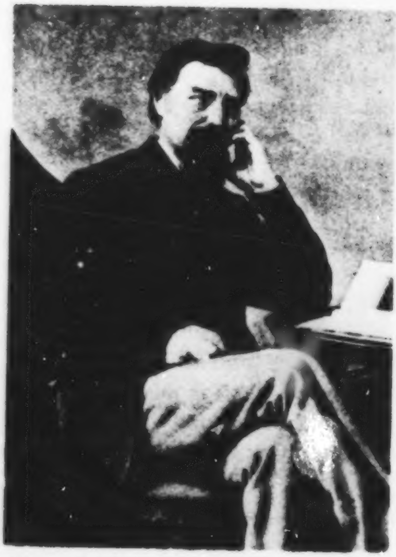
In 1864, a building crew was sent to create this new Rocky Mountain House. Heading the expedition was Richard Hardisty. Hardisty had recently married the Reverend George McDougall's eldest daughter, Eliza, a girl of sixteen, and her fortitude on her "honeymoon" to Rocky so impressed an old buffalo hunter, Peter Erasmus, that he later wrote: "Though she had been raised and educated in the East, she soon adapted herself to western conditions. Her honeymoon trip by cart trail to Edmonton and saddle horse to Rocky Mountain House was an event of historical fortitude."

The newlyweds probably lived in a tent for a time while the crew built a temporary fort. The temporary fort was definitely inhabited in the winter of 1864-65 when a wedding between a Miss Brazeau, Joseph Brazeau's daughter, and a Mr. McAuley drew many dignitaries to the fort. Chief Factor Christie came to the wedding as did the Reverend George McDougall, his son John, and daughter Nellie.

It was on this trip that John McDougall described the temporary fort. It "was built on a low flat near the river. The permanent fort was to be placed on a higher bench. . .on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan."

The first year's returns at this new Rocky Mountain House were good but, after that, trade was poor. The old problems of bad location, Blackfoot hostility and American competition hadn't gone away. The American Fur Company had gone bankrupt in 1864 but, in its place, an unscrupulous crowd of whiskey traders had poured in. They were living well off the Hudson's Bay Company's determination to eliminate liquor as a trade good. Rocky Mountain House stayed open, nonetheless, and it stayed open year-round for fear the Blackfoot would again burn it down.

The new fort was being built on grand scale; bigger and more comfortable than the previous forts on the site. Work went very slowly on it, however. The problem was mainly food. Rocky Mountain House, once a source of provisions, now needed provisions from Edmonton House. Joseph Brazeau oversaw the summer building crew of 1866 and was sc



When the Rev. George Millward McDougall (top right) and his son, John (above left, with his family) came to Rocky Mountain House in the mid 1860s, their motivation was partly to do missionary work and partly to have a family reunion. George McDougall's daughter, Eliza, was married to Richard Hardisty (bottom left), the chief trader at Rocky in the first years after it reopened in 1864 (Glenbow Archives).

Fort Building

The several versions of Rocky Mountain House were all built using Red River frame construction. Grooved posts were either sunk in the ground or fixed into sills lying flat on the ground. The frame was completed with another plate that attached to the top of the posts. Between the posts, horizontal logs were fitted, their tenon ends fitting into the vertical grooves down the sides of the posts. This kind of frame and wall was perfect for the fur trade because a large building could be made from small logs and buildings could easily be dismantled and floated to another location.

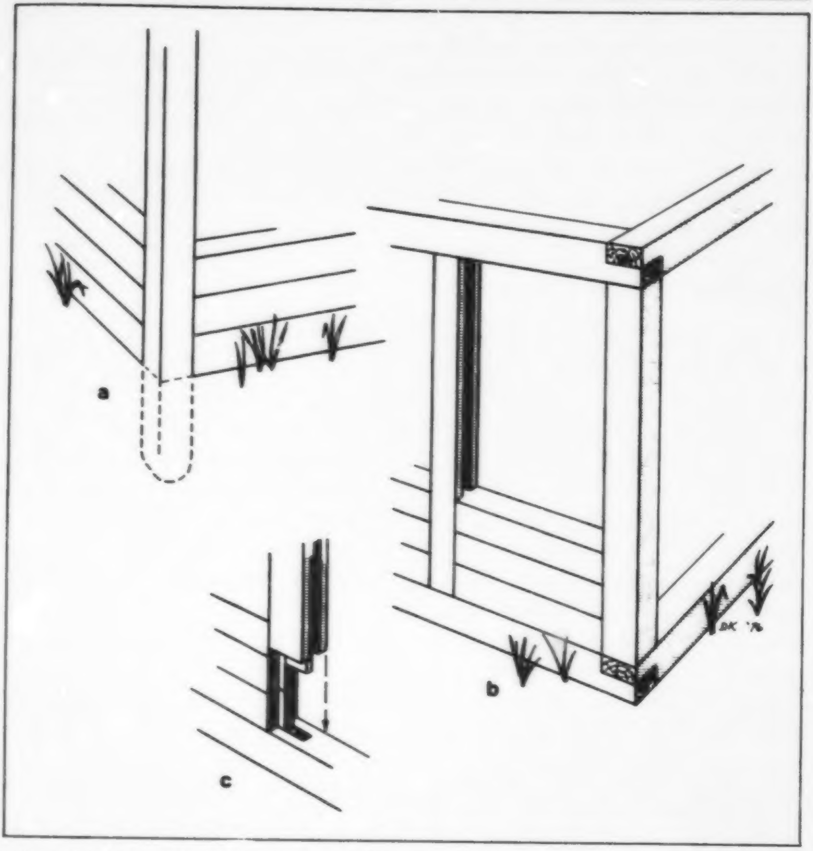
The roofs of the early forts were made of boards covered with pine or spruce bark. The roofs were sealed with mud and tree gum. This was quite a delicate covering in the face of the strong chinook winds and winter's northerly blasts, so repairing the roof was a more or less continuous task. The 1835-61 fort was probably the first to use a roof of overlapping boards, and the last fort sported the latest roofing innovation: shingles.

The floors and interior walls of the buildings were made of plank, cut out of trees in the sawpit. The walls were sealed inside and out with white mud, found in the river banks upstream. In the early years, windows were made of parchment. By the 1860s, most of the windows in the fort buildings were glass-paned.

The palisades of the fort were built of logs, set vertically in a four foot trench, infilled and tamped until they stood firm. The logs were tied together and the tops were cut square so no would-be intruder could throw a lasso on them and haul himself up. The 1835 fort had a gallery below the top of the palisade, joining corner bastions, but William Christie wanted no such feature for the final fort. A gallery was just a place for "Indians and Boys to be continually on" as far as he was concerned.

Nails, hinges and latches for the forts were fashioned in the blacksmith's forge. A ready-made supply of good coal, first noted by David Thompson, tumbled out of the river's north bank close to the fort to give the smithy his hot fire. The demand for iron pieces in the new fort outstripped the local blacksmith's capacity, and much of the iron had to come from Edmonton House.

The elements were so unkind to the building methods of the day that the post journals and letters from Rocky Mountain House abound with references to building and repairs. A period of abandonment meant rebuilding the fort practically from scratch.



The principles of building construction: (a) post in ground; (b) post on sill; (c) mortise and tenon (Parks Canada).

short of food he drew a letter of congratulation from Chief Factor Christie just for not having abandoned his post.

As the construction phase dragged on, Christie grew steadily more impatient. A year after praising Brazeau, Christie was tearing a strip off him for failing to make sufficient progress in the summer of 1867. A fire had destroyed 74,000 shingles and Brazeau had let the carpenters go down to Edmonton House for a break. Chief Trader James Hackland took over that winter.

Big Fort: Small Trade

The new fort was finally ready for occupation in the winter of 1868-69. John McDougall visited it in February, 1869, and described it as a "large place in regular fort style with stockades, bastions and citadel." It also had a proper "Big House" remininscent of the one John Rowand had built for himself at Edmonton House many years before. It was two-storey, with veranda and balcony, and, at the back, were two great mud and stone chimneys, the remains of which you can see at the park today. The big house was along the north wall, away from the river, and opposite the main gate. Along the east and west walls were long narrow buildings, one containing the men's quarters and the other, the storeroom. The Indian Hall was near the front gate. Within an adjacent palisade was space for the fort's garden.

It was a handsome structure; unfortunately, there was little to do or eat there. In 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company gave up control of Rupert's Land and no one stepped in immediately to take over that control. On August 29, 1869, the Red River newspaper *The Nor'wester* asked: "Why is it the Canadian authorities are so slow in taking possession of this territory now that everything seems to have been settled?"

Whatever the reasons, the result for Rocky Mountain House was a loss of trade. The American whiskey traders moved well across the 49th Parallel to take advantage of the authority gap. In December, 1870, Christie reported, "The Americans are now 60 miles on our side of the line selling 16 shooters, Revolvers, Amm^{n} and alcohol to the Blackfeet at Belly River — few of them came to R.M. house this fall." Rocky Mountain House, which had long coaxed the Assiniboine to go elsewhere now depended for its meagre trade on the few Assiniboines who lived along the mountains.

Starving

Chief Factor Christie may have felt a little sensitive about all the money he'd had the company lay out to build the new Rocky Mountain House. He certainly defended its existence against seemingly sensible suggestions that it should close. "The Rocky Mountain House is a fine strong Establishment, rebuilt at great expense solely to keep troublesome Indians away from Edmonton House and to prevent bloodshed, it was also established for the benefit of the Stone Indians who hunt in the mountains." But what did that mean for the pour souls charged with keeping the lean and troublesome fort open?

When John Bunn arrived at Rocky Mountain House in the fall of 1872, he found that no Indians had been in with provisions all summer "so that the folks up here have nothing to do but eat up the fruits of last year's trade." Frost had already destroyed the garden and Bunn's letter to Richard Hardisty, who was now running Edmonton House, ended with a request for a bottle of buttermilk.

John Sinclair was put in charge of Rocky Mountain House for the 1872-73 season. In a letter to Richard Hardisty from Rocky Mountain House, Sinclair asked for "some reading books to pass away dull time for this place has not much for me — it's only fit for an animal." Sinclair was also unimpressed with his men: "It's just as well to pay off Henry Pacquette and let him go. There is enough rubbish here without him, for he is half dead and half alive." By November the fort was already running short of flour and by mid-January, Sinclair was letting some of his men go. Their horses were so poor he had to lend them mounts for the trip to Edmonton House. "You might get some more of my men before long," he wrote Hardisty. "I see it's going to be hard times up here for grub."

In another month, Sinclair's letters were becoming plaintive and a bit shrill. "I am sorry to come to you so often for Grub this winter. . .It's no use to send up any more of their *blue mouldy pemmican*. The ten bags I brought up this winter were not fit for dogs to eat far less men. You know how it is when it's hard times up here, we have no other place to look but Edmonton. . .since I joined the company service this is the first time I lived so bad and I hope the last."

In the face of all this hunger the fort was still building its quota of York boats. In the February letter, Sinclair wrote, "There is now four boats just finish. I don't know how the others will get on. It will be the fault of provisions if their not built and it won't be my fault but I will try and get the six made if I should kill an ox or two." The letter ended, "All our

The artist Jean L'Heureux (top right) in the august company of Father Lacombe, Crowfoot (centre left, sitting), Red Crow (centre right, sitting) and other chiefs (Provincial Archives of Alberta).

Stonies are gone to Belly River to trade so I think our boat will go down light this spring." It was a sad end for the fort that had once contributed more than its fair share of the provisions of the entire Northwest.

The Blackfoot Indians were, according to Sinclair, "killing one another right and left by drinking" around the whiskey forts and the Indians had begun to appeal to the "Big Red River Chief of look after the Americans at Belly River." The Blackfoot also repeated their request that the Hudson's Bay Company build a fort closer to their hunting grounds. But, as long as the violence raged on the southwestern plains, the Hudson's Bay Company had no intention of making such a move. This traditional caution was looking somewhat absurd given that John McDougall was running a mission on the Bow River and David McDougall was trading there, both in safety.

An ugly massacre of Indians by whiskey traders in the Cypress Hills in 1873 reached the Canadian newspapers and put pressure on the government to create the North-West Mounted Police. In the fall of 1874, the Mounted Police trekked west and the whiskey traders quietly faded across

Charles Horetsky's photograph of Peigans at Rocky Mountain House in 1871 (Glenbow Archives).

Fort Whoop-Up. When the Plains Indians took their trade to American whisky forts like this one, it meant lean times and often starvation for the people at Rocky Mountain House (Glenbow Archives).

the border before them. It was the death knell for Rocky Mountain House. The Hudson's Bay Company established a post at Fort Calgary on the Bow River on the now quiet plains and, at the end of the 1874-75 season, Rocky Mountain House was closed.

There would be no mysterious resurrection this time for the Mountain Fort. A few of the buildings were dismantled and floated down the North Saskatchewan to serve at other posts and everything of value was taken. The fine fort that Chief Factor Christie had been so enthusiastic to build stood empty, quiet except for the barking of abandoned dogs and the wind. The wind whispered over the graves that seventy-six years had sewn in the meadow, whined through the palisades and rattled the broken windows. On this grassy plateau above the North Saskatchewan River, the fur trade had truly come to an end. Nature had begun to take back the place where all the Rocky Mountain Houses had stood.

Chimneys, C. 1900 (Parks Canada).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rocky Mountain House Revival

Squatters, Settlers, Townspeople

From 1875 until the turn of the 20th century, little worthy of mention happened at Rocky Mountain House. What was left of the fort after the valuable parts had been floated away was worn down by nature until only the chimneys remained.

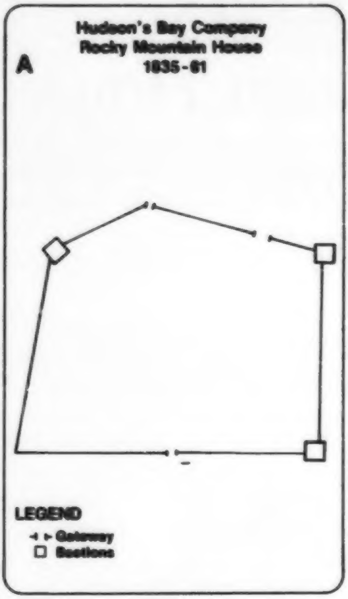
Homesteaders were slow to come to the Rocky Mountain House region. These thickly wooded parts of the country were left to the last, after all the open parkland and prairie had been occupied. A Mr. George Fletcher gets credit for being the region's first squatter. He arrived in 1904 and built near the fort ruins, two years before the region was surveyed and opened to homesteading.

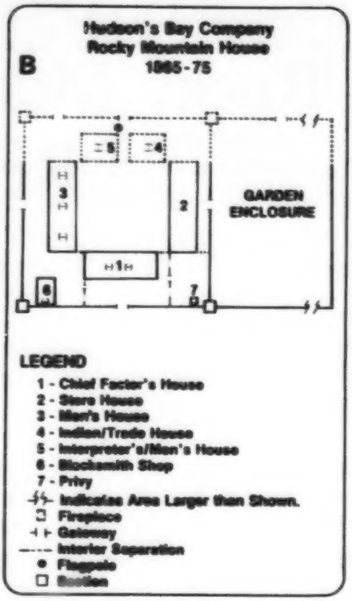
When enough of a population had accumulated, a town began to sprout. Toward this hamlet two railways were building, the Canadian Northern and the Alberta Central. The final goal of the railway companies was the Brazeau coal mines west of Rocky Mountain House and local resident, John Bertrand, expressed his opinion about who would get there first in a poem:

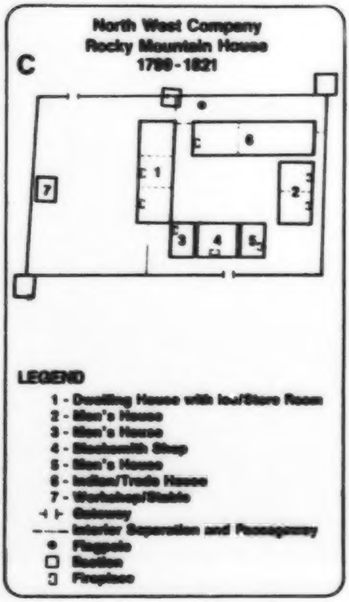
> Did you hear of the great C.N.R.
> The railroad that earned its renown
> By the way it goes forging its way through the west
> And linking up village and town.
> They're bound to be the first at the Brazeau Mines,
> And beat J.T. Moore at a walk;
> And show the A.C. (Alberta Central) that they're miles in the rear,
> And you can't build railroads with talk.

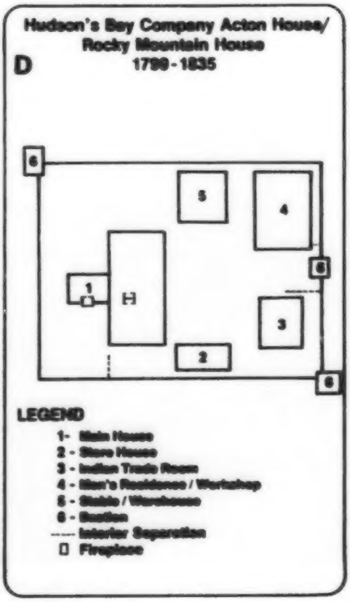
To some extent, Bertrand was right about Alberta Central. It was bought out by Canadian Pacific long before it got to either Rocky Mountain House or Brazeau Mines.

As for the nearby fur trade ruins, it became a Rocky Mountain House tradition to have annual picnics in the shadow of the fort chimneys. In 1929, Mrs. C. Brierley donated the land on which the chimneys stood. The local residents pushed for some sort of commemoration of the site,


Hudson's Bay Company
Rocky Mountain House
1835 - 61
A
LEGEND
Gateway
Bastions


Hudson's Bay Company
Rocky Mountain House
1865 - 75
B
5
4
3
2
1
6
7
GARDEN ENCLOSURE
LEGEND
1 - Chief Factor's House
2 - Store House
3 - Men's House
4 - Indian/Trade House
5 - Interpreter's/Men's House
6 - Blacksmith Shop
7 - Privy
Indicates Area Larger than Shown.
Fireplace
Gateway
Interior Separation
Flagpole
Bastion


North West Company
Rocky Mountain House
1799 - 1821
C
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
LEGEND
1 - Dwelling House with Ice/Store Room
2 - Men's House
3 - Men's House
4 - Blacksmith Shop
5 - Men's House
6 - Indian/Trade House
7 - Workshop/Stable
Gateway
Interior Separation and Passageway
Flagpole
Bastion
Fireplace


Hudson's Bay Company Acton House/
Rocky Mountain House
1799 - 1835
D
6
5
4
1
3
2
LEGEND
1- Main House
2 - Store House
3 - Indian Trade Room
4 - Men's Residence / Workshop
5 - Stable / Warehouse
6 - Bastion
Interior Separation
Fireplace

David Thompson's fort, the first Rocky Mountain House.

Stands of aspen encroach on cellar pits of 1865 fort.

Top: Muzzle-loading trade guns were one of the most popular trading items at Rocky Mountain House.

Bottom: At the push of a button the art of the story-teller recreates life at the fort. .

Top: The real thing! Ojibway birchbark canoe in Visitor Centre is about 100 years old.
Bottom: "Made Beaver," the currency of the fur trade.

ottom: York boats built at Rocky served other fur trade centres.

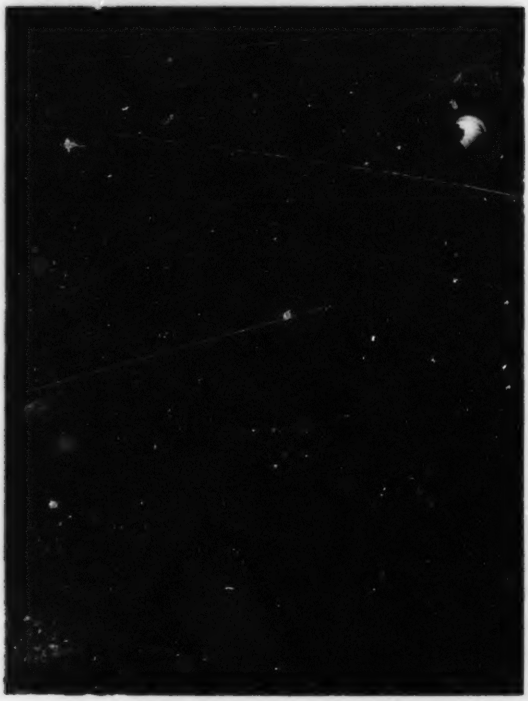
op: The North Saskatchewan — the fur trade's highway to the east.

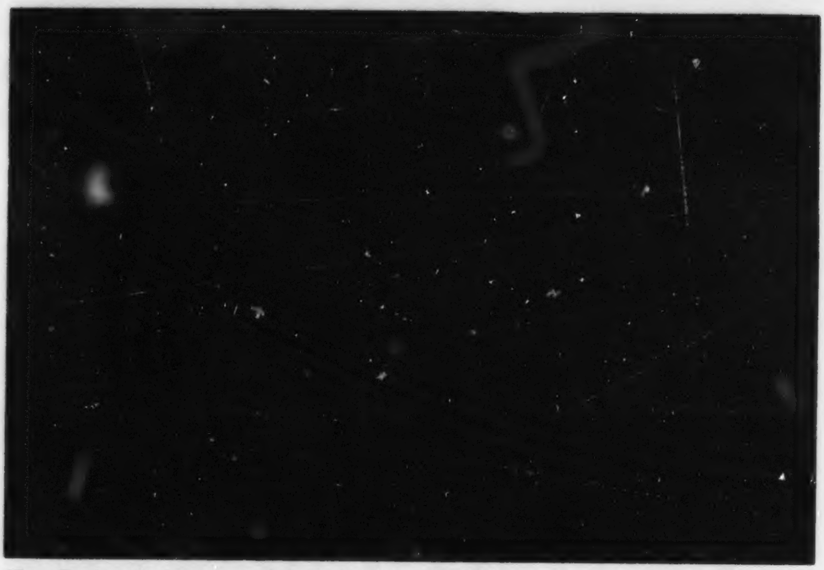
pposite: Restored chimneys of "the last, best fort."

Left: Meadowlands. Native people taught the traders to supplement their diet with wild plants.

Below: Partially rebuilt walls of Acton House show post-on-sill construction.

(Above) Visitors watch demonstrations of beading, leatherwork and candlemaking and (right) sample freshly brewed Labrador tea.





Top: During the latter part of the fort's history Red River carts were used on well-established trail to Fort Edmonton.

Bottom: West of Rocky Mountain House, the North Saskatchewan becomes too swift and shallow for easy navigation.

The first organized dig at Rocky Mountain House, in search of Henry Moberly's cannon in 1937 (Hudson's Bay Company).

and in 1931 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada erected a cairn and plaque dedicated to the fur traders of the last century. The chimneys were in a steadily worsening state, however, and William Kirby, the local postmaster, campaigned vigorously for funds to restore them. The money was found and the partial restoration took place in the late 1930s.

The first major archaeological investigations were done at Rocky Mountain House in 1962-63 and 1966 on the *two* fort sites then known to exist. From 1975-77, a more extensive survey and excavation was carried out and two more fort sites were discovered, one of which was identified as the 1835-61 fort. This site was partially excavated in 1975, 1976 and 1977.

The most difficulty the archaeologists and historians have had is in differentiating the two oldest fort sites. At the site farthest upriver, artifacts were found which definitely post-dated 1821, so the historians were able to conclude that this was the fort occupied after amalgamation, but deciding which was which before amalgamation is harder. Nor'wester and Hudson's Bay Company goods of the 1799-1821 period have been found at both sites and the post journals and other writings are unclear about the location. The decision then to dub the upriver fort site Acton

House (which later became the Hudson's Bay Company's Rocky Mountain House) and the next closest fort the Nor'westers Rocky Mountain House has been made very carefully, but not with absolute certainty. A marginal doubt remains.

The 228 hectares within which the fort sites lie became Alberta's first national historic park in 1979, and were gazetted as such in 1980. The park is open to the public most of the year. For current information about hours and opportunities at the park, please phone (403) 845-2412, or write the Superintendent at:

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park,
P.O. Box 2130, Rocky Mountain House, Alberta,
T0M 1T0

The Visitor Centre

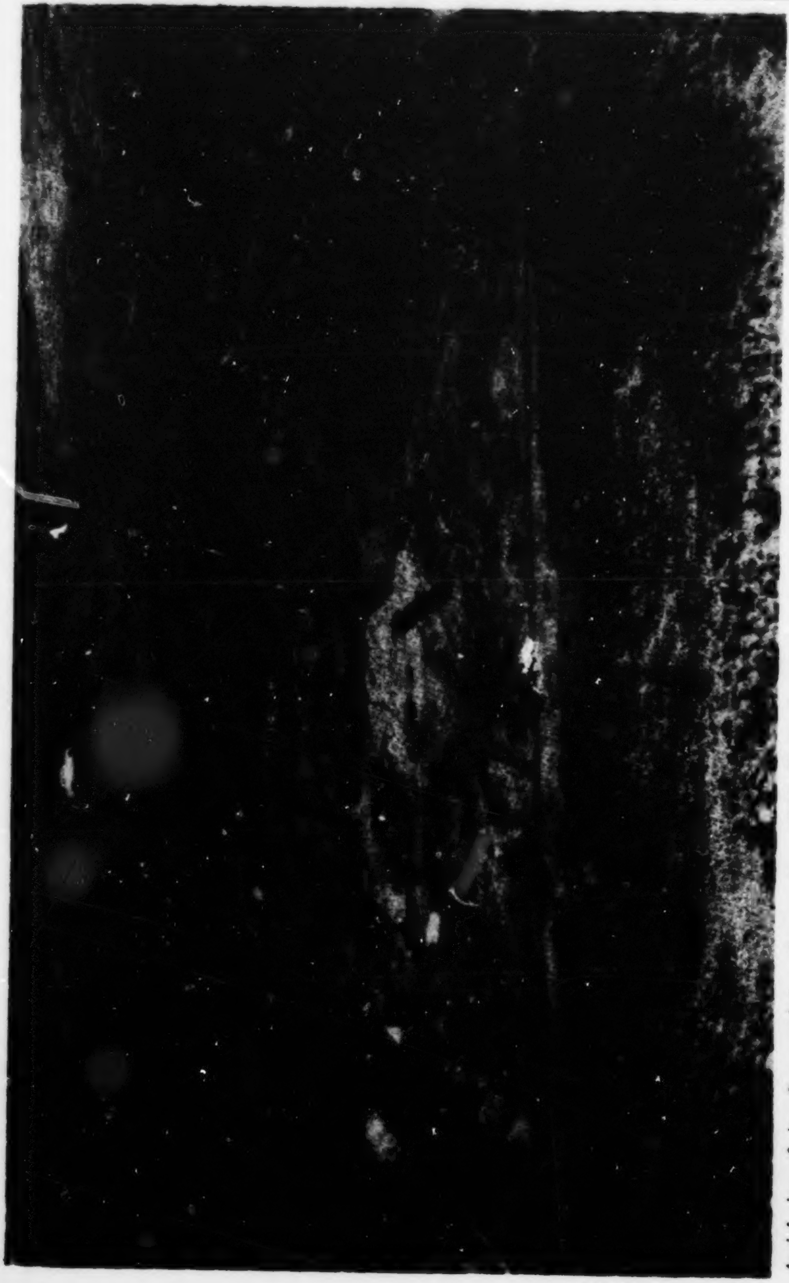
The main building on the park grounds today is not a fort but a VISITOR CENTRE. This is probably the best place to start your visit. Parks staff are on hand to provide you with pamphlets and information. The centre also has a small collection of artifacts on display. Here, you can see the type of sextant David Thompson used to mark his locations on tours of exploration, the kinds of clothing worn by the Indian tribes that visited the fort, and the kinds of trade goods they came to trade for. The excavations of the fort sites unearthed a number of artifacts and these are also represented: a Jew's harp from the 1835-61 site, coat buttons, necklace pendants, clay pipe fragments. The visitor centre also contains a replica of a trade room like the one the Indian customers of Rocky Mountain House entered through a narrow hallway in Butler's time. There might even be a trader behind his counter willing to barter with you.

In a small theatre, also in the visitor centre, films, videotapes and interpretive programs are shown, and the room also serves as a portrait gallery where you can put faces to history's names.

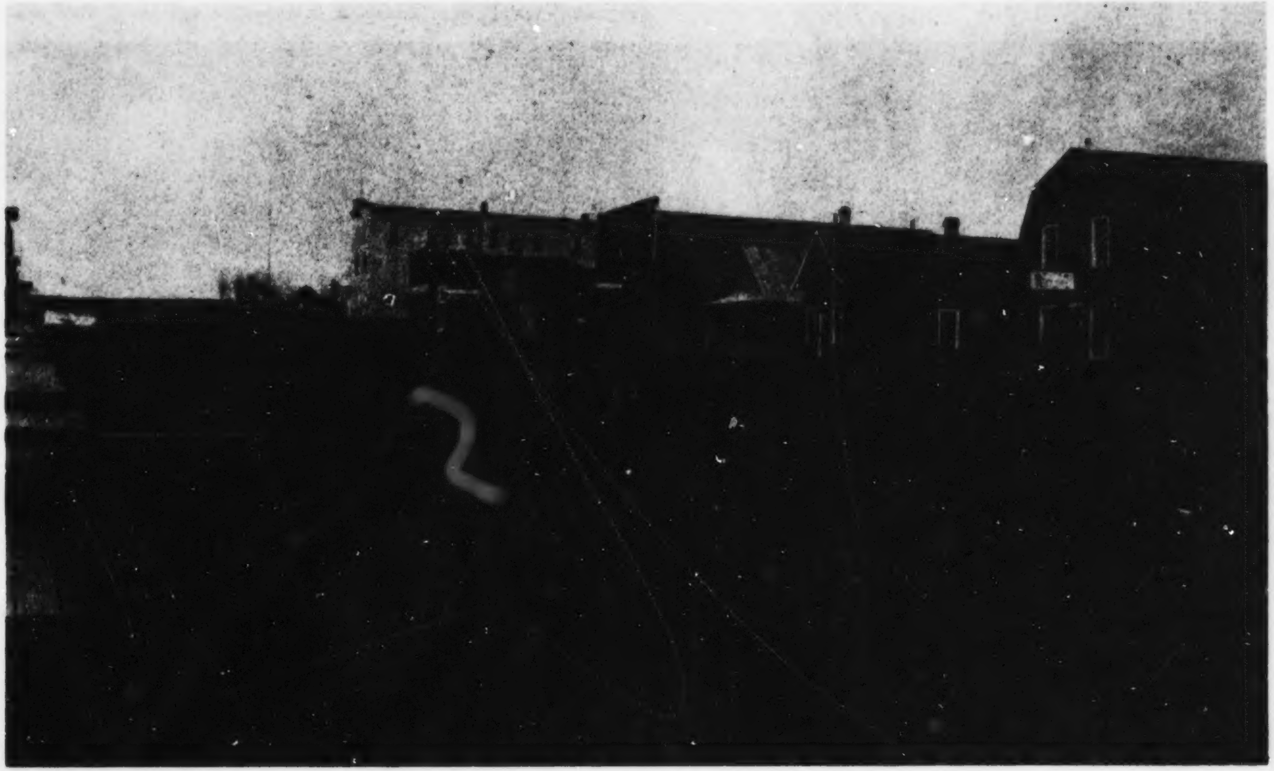
As you leave the visitor centre to walk around the park, please keep in mind a few regulations: no overnight camping, no metal detectors; and please keep your pets on a leash.

Two Walks Round

The trail system in the park links the Visitor Centre to the four fort sites. It is organized into a short walk (.7 km, 15 minutes), and a long walk (2.5 km, 45 minutes). If you follow the path from the visitor centre to the river bank, you will find the first solar-operated audioguide. Push the button and an actor impersonating James Robertson, one of the Nor'westers



Aerial view of site after completion of excavation, 1963 (Parks Canada).



Rocky Mountain House main street, 1913 (Glenbow Archives).

who lived at the original Rocky Mountain House, will tell you about the fur trade and what you need to know about the trails.

The park trails are not maintained in winter, but they make a pleasant circuit on snowshoes or cross-country skis.

The Short Walk

The .7-kilometre short walk takes you to the two most recent fort sites and the graveyard. Just a few steps east of the beginning audioguide is the site of the fort built by Chief Factor William Christie in 1868. Without the chimneys seen here, one wonders if there would be a park today. These tough survivors of wind and storm brought people back again and again, stirring the interest that led eventually to preservation. The chimneys were the fireplaces of the fort's Big House, which stood parallel to the north palisade; that is on the side of the stockade farthest from the river. One of these fireplaces would have been the one that warmed Father Lacombe the night he was wounded in a Blackfoot-Cree skirmish east of here and had to take refuge with Chief Trader Richard Hardisty.

As you look around and get a sense of the dimensions of the fort, it may seem that it was awfully close to the riverbank. But remember, the outer bank of the river is constantly being gnawed away by the current. In the 1860s and 1870s, the bank would have been several feet broader, and judging from Jean L'Heureux' sketch of the fort in 1873, there was a comfortable fringe of grass between the south palisade and the cutbank. The audioguide found here tells about "The Last Post."

Continuing east, the trail bends away from the riverbank and leads toward a graveyard and an audioguide titled "Hardship and Isolation." This is not the original location of these graves. In 1979, on the site of the Texas Pacific gas plant you can see farther east, twelve graves were accidentally disturbed. The remains were re-interred here.

Judging from what Thomas Woolsey said in 1858 about the "Cities of the Dead" at Rocky Mountain House being the largest he had ever seen, there must be more unmarked graves dotted around this meadow. The remains found in these graves suggested to historians an association with the 1835-61 version of Rocky Mountain House, the fort site near which they presently lie.

This fort is the next stop along your short walk. The audioguide at the 1835-61 site tells you about "Archaeology and History." Excavation is costly, exacting and time consuming when done correctly. Consequently, we don't rush in and dig (as people have unfortunately done in the past). The 1835 fort, unique for its irregular shape, has not been entirely excavated. When it is, precious new details for your story will surely yield to the archaeologist's shovel.

While here, take time to read the plaque devoted to Paul Kane. This is the fort Kane visited in 1848; where Assiniboine chiefs, "The Feather" and "The Half White Man" sat for portraits which now hang in the Stark Foundation of Orange, Texas and Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum.

From here, you follow the path back to the Visitor Centre.

The Long Walk

The long walk also starts at the audioguide closest to the Visitor Centre. It proceeds in the opposite direction from the short walk, leading westward to the two oldest fort sites. It then returns, passes the Visitor Centre, and follows the short walk pathway to the graveyard and the two newest forts. In other words, it goes to each of the four fort sites, in chronological order.

After a short amble along the top of the riverbank, the trail descends to a thickly forested river floodplain. Some of the trees here are well over a hundred years old. The trees open up near the river's edge at the demonstration site (See next section). From here, you can see and hear Brierley Rapids above which Alexander Henry crossed in 1810. Appropriately, Mr. James Robertson speaks from the audioguide of "The River — Highway of the Plains."

Farther along the floodplain, the trail turns inland. A few steps up bring you out of the trees at Acton House, the Hudson's Bay Company's first fort at this location. The audioguide tells about the fort, built in 1799 by James Bird and named in his honour. Acton was his hometown in England. From archaeological remains found here, historians have been able to conclude that this fort was occupied after 1821 when the rival companies amalgamated. At that point it lost the name Acton House and became Rocky Mountain House (The Second, if you like). It was finally abandoned in favour of a new fort several hundred metres downstream in 1835.

The palisades of the fort, as well as the exterior and interior walls of the building are marked here by low boards. The fireplace base you see is the original.

As you leave Acton House and walk up a slight rise, you come to an observation platform. Climb up and have a look at the park's herd of plains bison.

On top of the rise an audioguide tells about the Indian tribes who lived by the buffalo and traded at the posts.

On the plain above Acton House, you come to the original Rocky Mountain House site, the Nor-westers' 1799 fort which was abandoned in favour of Acton House in 1821. A different style of interpretation is used here to give you an impression of how the fort was built: that is, the trenches, main post holes and cellars have been dug out. The audioguide deals with building methods. The palisades were made of vertical logs which were sunk in a deep trench. The trench was infilled and tamped down hard so the logs stood firm. Into the deep round holes you see inside the outer trench, King-Posts were dug in. These had grooves down the side into which the ends of the horizontal logs were fitted. Other depressions were cellars, places where meat was stored within walls of ice, or where goods were kept or hidden. When the fort was abandoned for a season, iron goods were cached; that is, they were buried in a secret place. The secret was only known by two men and according to most fur trade old-timers, the secret was often mislaid along with the precious goods.

From here, the trail leads straight back to the Visitor Centre, a leisurely walk along which you can digest what Mr. James Robertson has told you so far and breathe deeply of the meadow fragrance. As you approach the Visitor Centre, you are a little over half-way along your long walk. You'll see a picnic area on your left. The long walk passes the Visitor Centre and then proceeds to the sites included on the short walk: first, the graveyard, then the 1835-61 fort, and, finally, the 1868-75 fort. (For more details on this half of the walk, see the previous section on "The Short Walk."

The Demonstration Site

Parks Canada is anxious to show the relics of Canada's history to you; it also wishes to preserve those vestiges of our past so they can be enjoyed by all future generations of Canadians. Long-term preservation often means "look, but don't touch," a circumstance that some find difficult, particularly children who may not yet read and who like to make their discoveries through the senses. In the summer season, the demonstration site, near the beginning of the Long Walk, on the river floodplain, gives the park visitor a chance to get his hands on and his teeth into history.

At the demonstration site, park staff, dressed in 19th century costume, relive the past. They build tipis, mould candles, smoke fish over an open fire. The kettle is usually on for tea, and you might even be offered a slice of fresh-baked "bannock" (unleavened bread). The staff might also be making pemmican when you arrive, pounding the dried meat, melting backfat and stirring the two together with a sprinkling of locally picked berries. If so, you will be in for a rare taste of the food that kept the fur brigades running in the season of open water. At the demonstration site, you can even put your hand to cutting wood with a cross-cut saw, or helping erect a tipi. Chances are, when you leave the site — with some food in your tummy and a sawing blister on your thumb — you'll have a different and more vivid feeling for the West that was.

Living Off the Land

When you follow the trails linking the fort sites, you will come across several interpretive signs with watercolour illustrations of different plants. The signs mark spots on the trail where the plants grow wild. (Your luck in spotting them will depend on how showy they are in the season you arrive.)

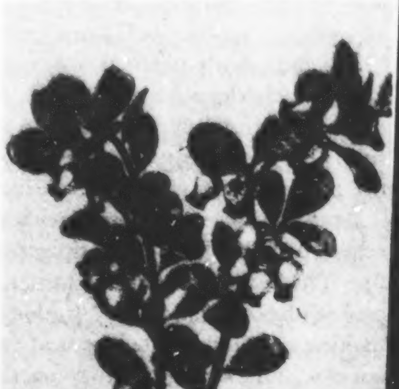
Each of these plants had a use (medicinal, decorative or nutritional) to the Plains Indian, uses discovered over their long inhabitation of North America and carefully held onto by oral tradition.

When the fur traders arrived in the West, they often suffered for lack of foods and medicines they were used to back home. Ignorance prevented them from using what was available in nature. The Indians were good enough to share their knowledge with the traders, however, and eventually the traders were soothing their upset or empty stomachs with the leaves, bulbs and berries that flourished around them.

On the following pages, the therapeutic use of some of these plants by the Plains Indians is noted. This is not a recommendation that you snip a leaf and eat it if you happen to be suffering from the symptom described. We no longer know exactly how the plants were used or in what quantity or combination. Not knowing, it's best not to try.

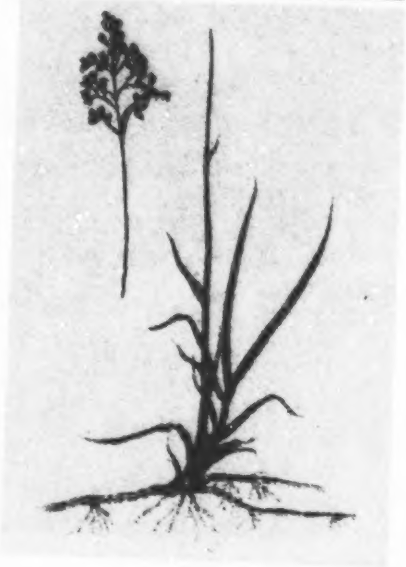
Kinnikinik or Common Bearberry

(Arctostaphylos uva-ursi)



In coarse, sandy soil, the bearberry grows, a low dense shrub with bright red, late summer berries. The berries are mealy and were used for food by the fur traders only as a last resort. The berries and leaves steeped together made a tea that heals canker and sore gums. A cream made from bearberry was used to treat skin sores and rashes. The Indians also used the leathery green leaves of the bearberry in combination with tobacco to make a smoking mixture they called "*kinnikinik.*"

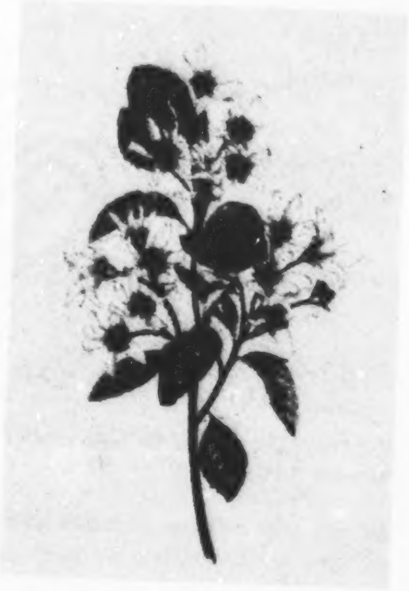
Sweetgrass
(Hierochloe odorata)



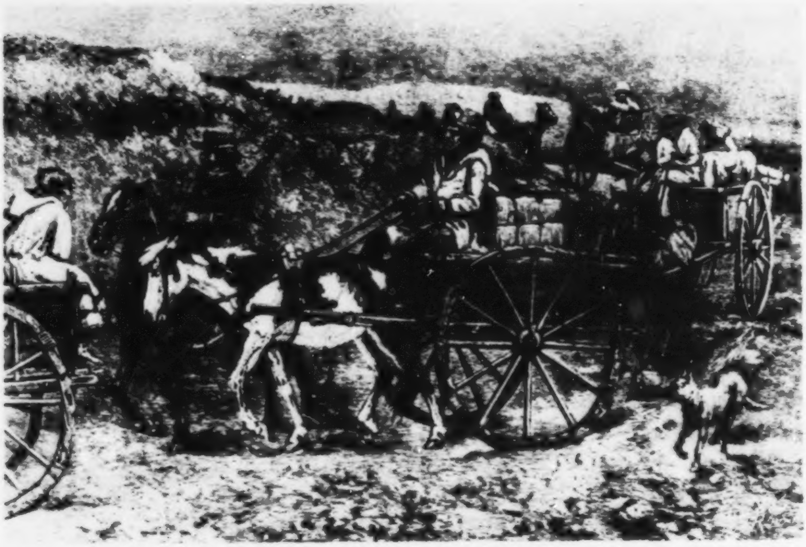
Sweetgrass is a wetland plant. It grows on the borders of ponds and marshes. The "sweet" in sweetgrass refers to its scent, the alluring smell emited by its leaves and stems. The Indians burned sweetgrass as an incense in many of their religious ceremonies and social rituals. They believed that a deep breath of sweetgrass smoke was proof against lying.

The Indians braided the stems of the sweetgrass together, double-strand, and broke off pieces to throw on the hot coals.

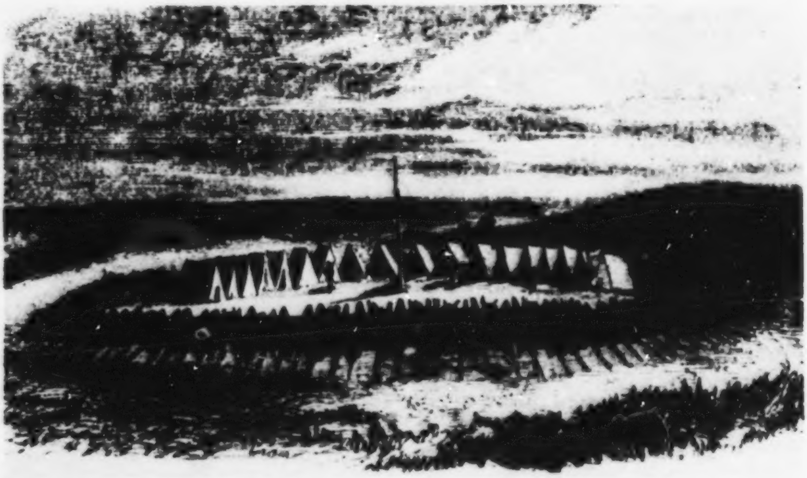
Saskatoon Berry
(Amelanchier alnifolia)



This shrub with its blue-black berries was in frequent use in the fur trade. The saskatoon berries, picked in late summer, were often used as flavouring in the making of pemmican. The berries were often wormy by the time they were used, but this didn't seem to make them any less usable in the eyes of the traders. The saskatoon berries, worms and all, were crushed and mixed in with the pounded meat and melted animal fat to make up the pemmican on which the fur traders and the Indians depended when game was scarce.



Métis cartmen carried fur trade goods overland in their Red River Carts. The squealing of the wheel hubs could be heard for over a mile (Glenbow Archives).



Red River Carts protected the Métis camps when they hunted in enemy territory (Glenbow Archives).

York Boats and Red River Carts

Along your walk through the park, you'll find a York boat and a Red River cart, two of the key means by which goods and people made their way from place to place in the 19th century Northwest.

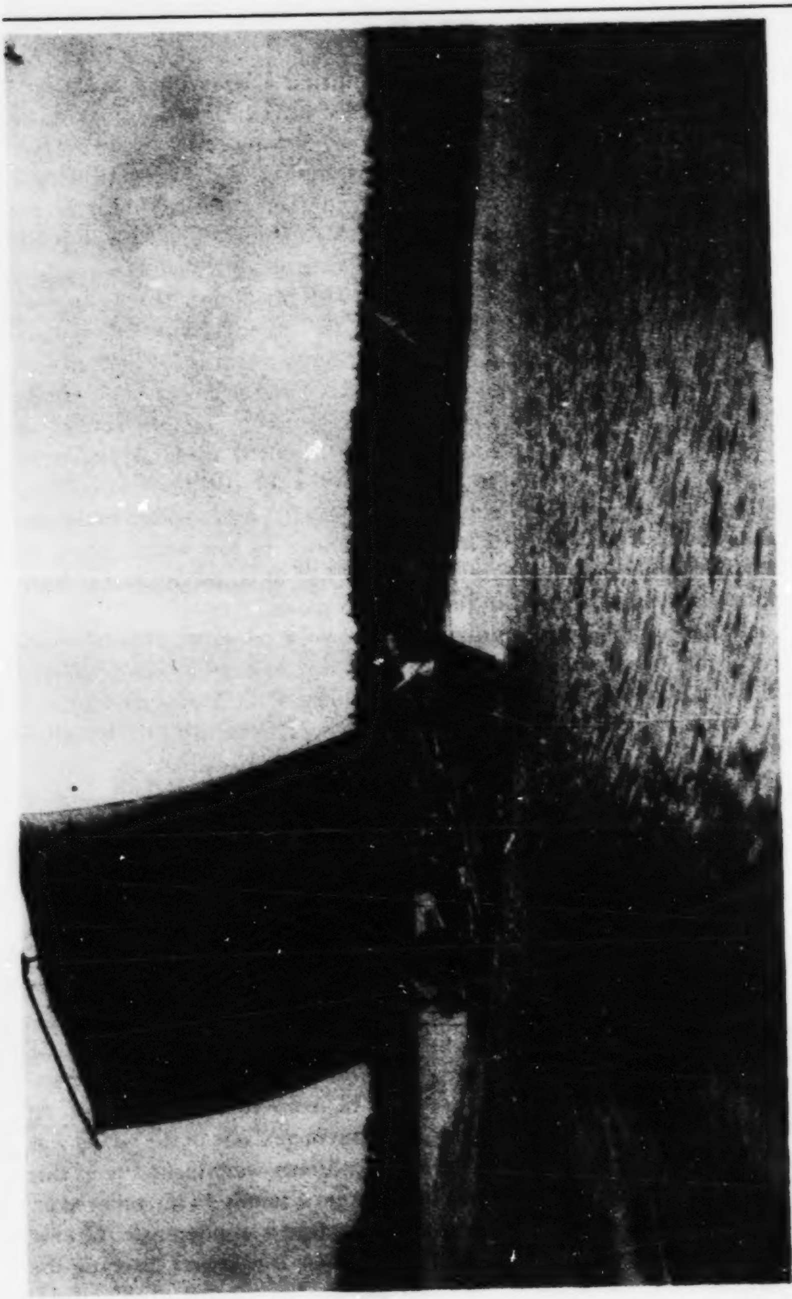
Standing beside the York boat, it's hard to think of this craft as being a speedy way of doing anything. Such a big, cumbersome craft: 12.8 metres long, 3.2 metres across its centre, over 1500 kilograms without a load! But when we talk of transporting furs and trade goods, speed is more than kilometres an hour; it is also quantity. The Hudson's Bay Company opted for the York boat, an imitation of an Orkney Islands design, in preference to the canoe, because it could carry so much more. That was the advantage. One of the disadvantages was the fact that it could not be carried across a portage by a couple of voyageurs as a canoe could. To portage the York boat, it was necessary to cut a three-metre swath through the forest and then to lay down poles for the boats to roll on. Moving upstream against a heavy current, the York boat often had to be poled or tracked (towed by a line from shore). In low water, going in either direction, most of the crew of twelve had to go ashore just to keep the laden boat high enough in the water to move.

Rocky Mountain House was given a quota of York boats to build every winter. More boats were needed to haul the furs east than were needed to bring the trade goods west. Consequently, most of the York boats built at Rocky Mountain House went downriver never to return. It was often easier to build new ones than to haul the old ones back.

It is difficult to say precisely where the Red River cart was invented. Some even credited one-time Rocky Mountain House manager, Alexander Henry, with its invention, but it's much more likely that Henry was one of the first to note its existence. The Red River cart was probably a product of evolution, owing some heritage to the kinds of carts used in early Quebec, then redesigned for the prairie on which it was used.

If you look at the wheels of the Red River cart, you'll see that they seem over-sized for the dimensions of the platform they bear. The size of the wheel was a matter of clearance. In deep mud and ruts, the cart would be less likely to get high-centred. The wheels were not flat but concave, partly for stability and partly so the cart could be made to serve as a boat. At high rivers, the cart was dismantled, and the convex side of the wheel was covered in hide. The rest of the cart and contents were lashed onto this makeshift hull which floated well enough to get a family to the other side.

The hub of the cartwheel is wood, fitted around a wooden axle. Grease was never used because it would catch the dust and gravel, causing the axle and hub to wear quickly. Without grease, the turning of the wheel,



York Boats (PAC PA41509).

wood on wood, produced a screech. A Métis cart train went nowhere in secrecy. The ear-grating chorus could be heard a mile away. The wheels were made of hard woods whereas the rest of the cart was made from whatever wood was most available.

Bison

The bison herd at the park is a good reason to take the binoculars when you visit Rocky Mountain House. The paddock fence is beside the "long walk" between Acton House and the 1799 version of Rocky Mountain House. An observation platform has been built there for those days when the herd is foraging on the far side of the field.

These are Plains Bison, the same species hunted by the Indians who traded here and the same that fed the people who lived here off-and-on for seventy-six years. When Paul Kane came west in the 1840s, he saw buffalo herds on the plains stretching as far as the eye could see. He joined the Red River Métis on one of their huge organized hunts and observed the slaughter of hundreds of animals. He estimated that the Red River Métis community alone killed 30,000 animals a year. When you add to this the thousands killed by the Indians for themselves and the fur trade, it is not too surprising that the bison numbers gradually diminished. But, it was the wholesale slaughter of bison with repeating rifles in the 1870s and 1880s that brought the animals to the very verge of extinction.

The bison that you see at the park today are descendants of one of the last herds, seven hundred of which were purchased by Canada from a Montana rancher in 1906. Five cows and one bull were brought to Rocky Mountain House National Historic Park from Elk Island National Park, and the herd has been growing ever since.

Please resist the temptation to climb the fence and go in for a closer look. The bison may look like a drowsy, quiet animal; but it can be very dangerous. It is tremendously fast for its size and quick to take violent action in defence of its young.

Amateur Archaeology

One of the few regulations visitors are asked to obey while at the park is that they not use a metal detector and not do any digging. We can guarantee in advance that you won't find any buried treasure, and you could do a lot of irreversible damage in looking. Unfortunately, much damage was done before the site was put under protection. The Brierley family who once owned this land certainly can't be faulted for cultivating it; it was made available to them for homestead and such a natural terrace close to town would have been an attractive farming prospect.

More damage was probably done by amateur treasure hunters when a rumour took flight in the 1930s that a cannon and a barrel of rum were buried within one of the old fort sites. This story came from Henry Moberly who was the master of the post during the winter of 1854-55. Moberly was a very old man when he told his story and, though his memory of most things was sharp, one suspects he might have been up to some mischief with this tale. Historian-geologist, J. B. Tyrrell, was a good friend of Moberly's and had often heard him reminisce about his days at Rocky. Oddly, Tyrrell had heard nothing of any cannon or keg.

Mrs. Mabel Brierley, who lived on the farm at the site, recalled that "people used to come and make a terrible mess digging our field. You couldn't stay away for a day. They just walked away leaving holes for the horses drawing the implements to stumble on." She also remembered people taking the flat chimney stones home to build doorsteps with.

The first organized dig occurred in 1937 when a team came on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company hoping to secure the cannon for the company museum. In all likelihood no cannon or keg of rum existed to be found and Parks Canada asks you not to search for this or anything else while visiting the park. An amateur turning up the earth can shovel away important layers of history without knowing he has touched a thing of importance. Only a skilled archaeologist can find the bits and pieces that do lie beneath the earth and recreate the events that placed them there.

Canoeing

Some visitors to the park prefer to arrive or leave as the fur brigades did. That is, they come in from upriver or depart downriver by canoe. Not many carry the experience as far as tracking and poling upriver against a heavy current.

The choice of this location by the fur companies probably had a lot to do with its marking the spot on the North Saskatchewan where the quiet water ends and the white water begins. Below Rocky Mountain House, all the way to Edmonton, the river's flow is almost free of rapids, whereas the upper part of the river, west of Rocky Mountain House, is strewn with rapids. What this meant to the Nor'westers of 1799 was that trade goods could be brought up this far and furs taken back down with no need to portage. What this means to the canoeist of the modern day is that Rocky Mountain House is the frontier between a peaceful water journey and a white water adventure. Those seeking the former kind of fun can come to the river here for a quiet float down to Drayton Valley, the next town 140 kilometres downriver; or, they can continue all the way to Edmonton, a 311-kilometre journey ideal for the novice.

The canoe expert in search of a test of skill can go to the town of Nordegg, 92 highway kilometres west of Rocky, put in there and ride the rapid-strewn torrent down to the park. Brierley Rapids, named for the family who homesteaded this area, are at the upper end of the park and make an exciting finish to such a run. Brierley Rapids have been the site of the Alberta Provincial White Water Championships.

If you come to the park specifically to have a go at the Brierley Rapids, you can enter by the park's south gate, which is directly opposite them. To reach the south gate, continue past the main park entrance on Highway 11A, travelling west another 2.6 kilometres. Turn left and follow the road to a T-intersection where you turn left again. Go straight to the end. This is the south gate. A trail leads down to the right, past a picnic site, and across the Brierley Rapids.

The Town of Rocky Mountain House

It is 7.5 kilometres from the park entrance to the town of Rocky Mountain House. The town has always been proud of its connection with the fur trade. When the railway reached this location, it wanted the village to be called "Lochearn," but the local residents wouldn't part with their old fur trade name, Rocky Mountain House. That spirit has been lasting and, today, visitors to the national historic park can expect a hearty welcome in the town.

Rocky Mountain House has around five thousand residents, a population supported mainly by oil and gas, lumber and agriculture. Tourists will find it well endowed with places to stay and eat. Overnight camping is not permitted at the park itself, but the town has two campgrounds, as well as several hotels and motels.

Rocky Mountain House has a golf course, tennis courts and an indoor pool, as well as abundant hiking, skiing and fishing spots in the area. This location represented the threshold of the Rocky Mountains to the fur traders and it still has that frontier flavour today. It is at the edge of a wilderness, and is handy to a number of provincial and national parks as well as several forestry campgrounds. Good private facilities are also present in the area: cross-country ski runs, an exotic game farm, cabins and an opportunity to go on a sleigh-ride, hay-ride or skating outings with the family.

The town complements the park nicely. It represents the next stage in Western Canadian history: the homestead boom and the springing up of small towns. Visit the town museum and find out what happened when the York boat and the Red River cart gave way to the railroad.

Historic Sites in Alberta: The Bigger Story

Alberta history didn't begin or end with Rocky Mountain House and the fur trade; and a trip through historic Alberta needn't begin or end there either. Rocky Mountain House is the only national historic park in Alberta, but the landscape is dotted with national historic sites, where cairns and plaques commemorate important people, places and events from the past. The Alberta government also has a system of historic sites in the province. Following is a quick reference to national and provincial historic sites that make up the bigger history of Alberta.

National Historic Sites in Alberta

Northern Alberta

1) Fort Dunvegan (1805-1918), centre of the Peace River fur trade.
2) J. G. Brick (1836-1897), Peace River missionary.
3) Sheridan Lawrence (1870-1952), Peace River pioneer.
4) W. D. Albright (1881-1946), agricultural research pioneer.
5) Fort Fork (1793), starting point of Alexander Mackenzie's journey to the Pacific in 1793.

Edmonton/Jasper Area

6) Athabasca Pass (1811), fur trade route through the Rockies.
7) Fort Assiniboine (1825-1842), Athabasca River fur trade fort.
8) Henry House (1811), Nor'wester post on the Athabasca River.
9) W. R. "Wop" May (1896-1952), pioneer bush pilot.
10) David Thompson (1810-11), discovery of Athabasca Pass.
11) Overlanders — journey of the Cariboo gold-seekers of 1862.
12) Jasper House (1850), fur trade post on the Athabasca River.
13) Creation of the Province of Alberta (1905).
14) Northwest Rebellion (1885). The Métis rebel against central Canada.
15) Emily Murphy (1868-1933), one of Alberta's "Famous Five" crusaders for women's rights.
16) Alberta Field Force (1885) led by Major General T. Strange.
17) Frank Oliver (1853-1933), champion of responsible government for the prairies.
18) John Rowand (1787-1854), Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District.
19) Edmonton Grads (1925-1940), Alberta's world champion women's basketball team.

Central Alberta

20) Anthony Henday (1754), first white man to see Alberta.
21) Father Albert Lacombe (1827-1916), Catholic missionary.
22) Frog Lake Massacre (1885). Nine killed by Crees at the beginning of the Northwest Rebellion.
23) Mary I. Parlby (1868-1965). Another of the "Famous Five" who established women's rights as "persons" throughout the British Empire.
24) Paul Kane (1810-1871), Toronto artist who painted the West in the 1840s.
25) Rocky Mountain House (1799-1875), fur trade post.
26) Rundle's Mission (1840s). Rev. R. T. Rundle's Methodist mission.
27) Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927), Alberta's Icelandic poet.
28) The Peacemakers (1885). Father Lacombe and John McDougall at Wetaskiwin.
29) George McDougall (1821-1876), Methodist missionary.
30) Edmonton House/Fort Augustus-HBC and North West Co. forts at the same location in the early 19th century.
31) Preservation of the Plains Buffalo (1906). One of the last herds of bison saved from extinction.
32) Wetaskiwin Courthouse (1909), architecturally significant as an example of court house design from this period in western Canada's history.

Calgary/Banff Area

33) Fort Calgary (1875), NWMP fort.
34) Crowfoot (ca. 1830-90), Chief of the Blackfoot Confederation.
35) Blackfoot Crossing (1877), where Treaty #7 was signed.
36) Henry Wise Wood (1860-1941), "The uncrowned King of Alberta"; founder of the Alberta Wheat Pool.
37) Patrick Burns (1856-1937), pioneer rancher; one of the "Big Four" who funded the first Calgary Stampede.
38) R. B. Bennett (1870-1947), Calgary lawyer who was Prime Minister of Canada from 1930-35.
39) William Pearce (1848-1930), land surveyor and naturalist.
40) William Aberhart (1878-1943), Calgary school principal who became the first Social Credit Premier of Alberta in 1935.
41) Howse Pass (1807), David Thompson's North Saskatchewan route to the Columbia, named for Joseph Howse who travelled it later for the HBC.
42) J. M. Gibbon (1875-1952), founder of the Canadian Authors' Association.

43) Palliser Expedition (1857-60), pre-settlement exploring expedition in Western Canada.

44) Sulphur Mountain Cosmic Ray Station (1956-78), built as part of an international network of stations monitoring cosmic rays during International Geophysical Year.

Southern Alberta

45) A. E. Cross (1861-1932), pioneer rancher.

46) Louise C. McKinney (1868-1931), one of the "Famous Five"; first woman to sit in a legislature in the British Empire.

47) Charles Magrath (1860-1949), Dominion Land Surveyor.

48) First Air Crossing of Canadian Rockies (1919) from Vancouver to Lethbridge by Captain E. Hoy.

49) First Coal Mine (1872). North bank of the Old Man River at Lethbridge.

50) Fort Benton/Fort Macleod-Wagon Trail across the 49th Parallel until 1882-83.

51) Fort Macleod (1874), the first NWMP fort in the West.

52) Fort Whoop-Up (1869). An American whiskey fort; one of the reasons the NWMP came into existence.

53) Henrietta M. Edwards (1849-1931), a member of the "Famous Five" who fought the "Persons Case."

54) Indian Battle of 1870, last great battle between the Blackfoot and the Cree, near Lethbridge.

55) Red Crow (1830-1900), Chief of the Bloods; signer of Treaty #7.

56) Galt Canal (1899), first large scale irrigation project in Canada.

57) Territorial Court House (1904), only one surviving from the Territorial period.

58) First Oil Well in Western Canada (1902), drilled near Cameron Lake in present-day Waterton Lakes National Park.

Some Related Sites in B.C.

59) Kootenae House (1807), David Thompson's fur trade fort across the mountains.

60) Fort Steele (1887), North-West Mounted Police fort in the mountains just west of the modern Alberta border.

61) George Simpson (1792-1860), Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Alberta Provincial Historic Sites

62) Historic Dunvegan-Fur trade post, missionary, garden and transportation centre.

63) Fort McMurray Oil Sands Interpretive Centre-History and technology of the oil sands.
64) Victoria Settlement-Missionary centre and fur trade post.
65) Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village. Early Ukrainian settlement in east-central Alberta.
66) Strathcona Archaeological Centre. Prehistory of man in Alberta.
67) Father Lacombe Chapel (1861), built by the pioneering missionary.
68) Rutherford House (1911), home of Alberta's first premier.
69) Stephansson House (1927), home of the Icelandic poet, Stephan G. Stephansson.
70) Cochrane Ranche (1880s), the first of the really large-scale ranches established in Alberta.
71) Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. Used for almost 6,000 years to drive bison to their deaths; a World Heritage Site.
72) Leitch Collieries, one of the largest coal mines in Crowsnest Pass.
73) Crowsnest Pass Visitor Centre. History of the pass and the people of the area.

Other National Historic Parks and Major Sites in Western Canada

Fort St. James National Historic Park, near Prince George, B.C.

Ft. St. James was established by Nor'wester Simon Fraser in 1806 to serve the Carrier Indians. After amalgamation it became the headquarters of the New Caledonia fur trade district. Five fort buildings dating from the 1880s stand at the historic park today.

Kitwanga Fort National Historic Site, near Terrace, B.C.

Kitwanga is the first national historic site in Western Canada to commemorate Indian culture. Overlooking the Kitwanga River, this hilltop was once a fortified stronghold of the Kitwanga people. According to legend, Nekt, a fierce warrior, led raids against the Nass River and coastal peoples from this historic hill.

Fort Langley National Historic Park and *St. Roch*, National Historic Site, near Vancouver, B.C.

Fort Langley was built by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1827 and was moved to its present site in 1839. It was a supply depot for the inland posts and later for the gold prospectors on the Fraser River. The original 1840s storehouse remains on the site and has been supplemented by a reconstructed palisade, bastion, artisan's shop, trade store, forge and Big House.

The *St. Roch*, a two-masted schooner in dry dock at Vancouver's Maritime Museum, was declared a national historic site in 1962. During its twenty-six years of active service as an Arctic supply and patrol vessel it became the first ship in history to sail the Northwest Passage in both directions; the first also to circumnavigate North America.

Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Park and Fisgard Lighthouse National Historic Site, Victoria, B.C.

Fort Rodd Hill and Fisgard Lighthouse are both located at the mouth of Esquimalt Harbour. Fort Rodd Hill is an artillery fortification which guarded the harbour mouth while Fisgard Lighthouse made the same harbour mouth safe and recognizable. The lighthouse was built in 1860, the first navigational aid on British North America's west coast. The Ft. Rodd Hill artillery emplacements first began to guard Victoria in 1895.

Rocky Mountain House: All in All

It is hard to say whether the most important moments in Rocky Mountain House's history occurred in the 19th or the 20th century. Was the day in 1799 when John McDonald of Garth broke ground for the first fort any more important than the day in this century when the local community stood by the name Rocky Mountain House rather than accept the railway name Lochearn? If the latter had not happened, the former might not be remembered. In the same way, the 1931 commemoration of the Rocky Mountain House fur trade by plaque and cairn may well have safeguarded the much more distant day when David Thompson pushed off from these river banks to forge his route through the mountains to the Columbia.

Local postmaster William Kirby's campaign to have the chimneys restored in 1939; Mrs. Mabel Brierley's donation of the land on which the chimneys and cairn stand; the Historic Sites and Monuments Board's decision to designate Rocky Mountain House as a site of national historic importance; and finally, the naming of Rocky Mountain House as Alberta's first historic park: each step assured the memory of the forts and their people; the Métis, native peoples, Canadians and Europeans who worked, fought and danced on this valuable soil. The fur trade is gone; the plains are long tamed and settled; but Rocky Mountain House lives on.

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